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Romances



SPRING ISSUE
FEATURING 4 FRESH
LOVE STORIES
FILLED WITH NEW
BEGINNINGS!

Cautious Lover

Catspaw

Through Laughter and Tears

Castles and Fairy Tales

STEPHANIE JAMES

ANNE STUART

MARIE FERRARELLA

MARGARET ST. GEORGE

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Stephanie James's first romance novel appeared over ten years ago, and she is now considered one of the genre's most popular writers. The author, whose commitment to romance fiction continues to grow with her success and reputation, has more than ten million copies of her books in print. She presently lives in Washington State with her husband.

ANNE STUART

Anne Stuart began her writing career at age seven, when she was first published by *Jack and Jill* magazine. Her first novel was published by the time she was twenty-five. Anne lives in rural Vermont, and lists her hobbies as quilting, reading and daydreaming.



MARIE FERRARELLA

Marie Ferrarella lives in Southern California. She describes herself as the tired mother of two overenergetic children and the contented wife of one wonderful man. She is thrilled to be following her dream of writing full-time.

MARGARET ST. GEORGE

For Margaret St. George, writing fills a creative need, one she has been satisfying since she was sixteen. She starts her stories by asking herself "What if...?" then begins to formulate her characters. Her wit and deeply emotional writing have made her a reader favorite and an award winner.



HARLEQUIN®
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From the desk of Candy Lee,
Managing Editor

Dear Romance Reader,

Spring—a time for fresh beginnings! I have always found that as soon as I can see the first buds on the trees and the new Spring bulbs, I think of sitting outside with romance reading and enjoying the beautiful colors and sounds of a new season.

So today, my plans are to find a warm spot in the sun with this month's volume of the World's Best Romances and read all about...a man with a master plan who takes on a woman determined to find the warmth under the controlled facade...a chance meeting that turns fantasy into reality—but what will happen when the "truths be told"?...a comic who tries to hide her desire to be so much more than client to her manager...and a famous ex-cat burglar, who while protecting fabulous emeralds, steals the heart of a woman set on finding him resistible!

We hope that each one of the beautiful stories in this Spring Edition sparks a special warmth in your heart, making your spring a joyous one!

Best wishes,

Candy Lee

112 Tenth Street, P.O. Box 11233, Des Moines, IA 50340-1233

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**STEPHANIE
JAMES**
**Cautious
Lover**



Jess Winter was a cautious lover, but Elly Trent knew there was warmth locked beneath his controlled facade. Perhaps playing the seductress would provide the key....



It hadn't been the most romantic proposal of marriage, and if Elly Trent weren't so passionately in love with Jess Winter, she would have told him what to do with it. Here on the Oregon coast there were several points where he could take a long walk off a short cliff.

Elly had recovered quickly from her initial disappointment and asked for time to think it over. She had stalled him now for a week. Jess wasn't an easy man to stall: he always seemed to be operating on some schedule that he adhered to strictly.

The offer of marriage had come last weekend. On Sunday evening, as usual, Jess had returned to Portland, where he was an expensive, high-powered and occasionally very ruthless executive consultant.

He'd reappeared this afternoon, as he did every Friday, pacing into her shop, The Natural Choice, with that strong, controlled stride. He was on time, of course. Jess was always on time. And one look into his fog-gray eyes was enough to tell Elly that the issue between them would be settled this weekend.

Now Elly opened the oven door and peered at a simmering lentil casserole, then leaned over to probe its surface.

"Ouch! Dammit...." Elly turned on the cold-water faucet and stuck her finger under the spray.

"What happened?" Jess wandered into the spacious old kitchen with a glass of Scotch in one hand.

"Nothing. Burned my finger, that's all." She picked up a loaf of whole-grain bread and reached for a knife.

"Be careful with that knife, Elly. I just sharpened it last week."

"I know. Thursday I cut myself on the paring knife."

"I had to sharpen it, too," he told her. "You'd been using it to dig around in the dirt again."

"I'd just used it to trim a few leaves off my ivy plants."

"And you've got a house full of plants." Jess fingered the leaves of a bushy fern. "You should use proper gardening tools, though, Elly. Not your kitchen knives. You never know when you're going to need a good, sharp knife."

"Yes, I know." She concentrated on the bread.

"Everything go all right at the shop this week?"

"Fine, just fine. What about you? Going to be able to wind up your consulting job on schedule?"

"Yes."

Elly put down her knife and picked up the glass of Pinot Noir she'd been sipping. "Yes," she repeated. "You always get things done on schedule, don't you?"

Jess tilted his head slightly to one side, considering her. His gaze wan-

dered over the neat coronet of braided chestnut hair, took in the warm, tawny-gold eyes and the brilliant persimmon-colored sweater she wore over a pair of snug, faded jeans. She was slightly flushed from the heat of the stove, and looked very good to him. He wondered at the faint edge in her voice.

"Why are you nervous tonight, honey?" Jess touched her jaw. "Why so sharp? You're usually so easy and restful to come back to on the weekends."

Elly smiled. "We're not all as calm and collected as you are, Jess."

Jess Winter, she knew, was thirty-seven years old. He had spent those years making himself successful—on his own terms, Elly suspected. There was too much raw power and passion lying just beneath the surface of the man ever to allow him to take the easy way out. She just wished some of that passion could be channeled in her direction.

Until now their relationship had been a polite, friendly, all-too-casual courtship. He came to her on the weekends seeking peace and quiet, not excitement and passion. If Elly hadn't sensed a vein of fire in this man, she would have given up in frustration several weeks ago. She might yet have to face the fact that she simply wasn't the woman who could bring out his passionate side.

"You're nervous because you're about to accept an offer of marriage," Jess said with characteristic insight. "That's it, isn't it? I didn't expect it to set you on edge like this."

"Well, it certainly doesn't seem to have set you on edge," Elly muttered tartly.

Jess shrugged. "Why should it? Elly, we're perfect for each other and you know it. You're just what I need. Just what I want."

Elly put the sliced bread into the oven to warm. "Are you sure, Jess?"

"Is that what's worrying you? That I don't know my own mind? After the past eight weeks you should know me better than that."

Elly sighed. "You're right. You always seem to know exactly what you're doing and why. The way you arrived in town and immediately began negotiating for that old Victorian monstrosity by the sea, the way you're winding down your career so you can move here and set up an inn, *everything* you do. It's all tidy and certain." She reached for her glass of wine.

"Getting things in order, knowing what I want and how to get it, those are my strong suits, Elly. That's how I operate. I didn't think it bothered you."

She rushed in to reassure him. "It doesn't bother me! I admire the way you get things done. You've got so many plans and ideas, and I just know you'll be successful running your inn, but I'm—"

"You're what, Elly?"

"I guess I'm just not sure why you want to marry me."

He leaned down and brushed a kiss across the tip of her nose. "I keep telling you, we're perfect for each other. We're—comfortable together. Similar interests, similar goals."

"Has it occurred to you that I may not see myself in the role of comfortable companion?" Elly said.

Jess eyed her challenging expression. "Are you sure nothing is wrong, Elly?"

"Of course I'm sure." Elly closed her eyes in brief frustration. "Jess, it's just that I've been thinking about you all week, knowing you'd expect an answer this weekend. I've been getting more and more anxious for no real reason." She tried a fragile grin. "After all, women my age don't receive offers of marriage every day."

"Thirty is fairly advanced, all right. You should be grateful I've come along to rescue you from a life of boring spinsterhood." There was laughter in his eyes.

"Is that how you see yourself? As my rescuer?"

"To tell you the truth," Jess said mildly, "I think you're rescuing me."

That caught her interest. "From what?"

"More than you will ever know," he said lightly. "Isn't that casserole ready yet?"

"I think so. Why don't you take the bottle of wine over to the table?" She turned back to the stove.

The unnerving truth was that Jess Winter had made no effort to introduce any passion into the relationship. She thought about it bleakly as she ladled the rich lentil concoction into earthenware bowls.

There had been casual hugs, warm but almost cautious embraces, a great deal of hand-holding and one or two kisses that Elly thought contained the seeds of passion. But it seemed to her

that as soon as Jess sensed any threat to his self-control he pulled back. It was downright disturbing. If she couldn't find a way to test the sensual side of his nature, Elly knew she would have to decline his proposal. Only fully reciprocated love would coax her into marriage. Elly had made that decision this morning.

"How long will you be staying this time?" she asked as she carried the bowls over to the table. She returned to the kitchen to collect the rest of the meal.

Jess shook his head in mock wonder. "You're always so calm about that question. A lot of women would give me a great deal of static over my coming and going so frequently. But not you."

Elly sat down and concentrated on tasting her casserole.

"You know, I think that after we're married I'll move in here with you while we wait for the renovation work on the inn. When it's finished we can live there."

"Jess—"

"Another couple of weeks and I'll be through in Portland. If we plan the wedding for the end of the month everything should dovetail nicely. All right with you?"

"Jess, I think we ought to discuss this."

"There's nothing major to discuss. I'll handle all the details. We can have the reception right here, I think. Should be enough room."

Elly gave up trying to deflect him from his casual planning of her life. Instead she tried to focus on her goal for that evening. She'd never set out

deliberately to seduce a man before, and the prospect was intimidating. With Jess Winter there was no predicting the outcome.

"Leave the dishes," she said as they finished. "We can do them later."

He nodded. "Okay. Whatever you like."

She cleared her throat. "I thought it might be nice to build a fire and have a glass of brandy in front of it. How does that sound?" She was already heading into the living room.

"Sounds fine."

Jess walked over to the old stone hearth and reached for some kindling.

"There's some newspaper in that sack," Elly said, unobtrusively turning off some lights, "to help start the fire."

She eyed Jess as he concentrated on his task. In the firelight she could see hints of silver in Jess's dark hair. There was a casual, masculine grace about him now as he knelt in front of the flames. She responded to it the way she always did, wanting to touch him, but forced herself to relax.

"How was the drive from Portland?" she asked, pouring two brandies.

"No problem. The fog's coming in tonight, though." Jess got to his feet and accepted the snifter from her.

"Sit down." Elly indicated the huge, overstuffed sofa. When he'd obligingly seated himself she sank down beside him, curling her legs under and leaning into his warmth. Jess's arm slipped around her shoulders, and he took a thoughtful sip of brandy. She could feel him relaxing.

"Honey, you don't know how good this is," he murmured. "All week I look forward to getting back here and unwinding with you."

"I'm glad." Elly tried to nestle closer. Jess's arm tightened fractionally but not much. He seemed content to sit like this. "We lead a very quiet life around here during the winter, Jess." She took a breath. "Are you sure it won't be too quiet for you?"

"I know what I'm doing, Elly. I usually do." He lifted his hand to toy with her braids.

Elly waited hopefully, but his touch was clearly just another absent caress, not the prelude to taking down her hair. If she didn't take the initiative, they would sit here all evening like this. Deliberately Elly put her fingertips on Jess's thigh. He didn't seem to notice.

"You were right about the fog," she said. "It's very heavy tonight."

"Umm." Jess leaned his head back in contentment.

Elly let her hand slide down along the inside of his leg. Simultaneously she turned her face into his chest. It was obvious she was going to have to be more aggressive. "You smell good."

"Not likely. I haven't showered since this morning."

She put her hand on the first button on his shirt. "No, really, you do smell good," she insisted, fiddling with the button. "Warm and sexy." She succeeded in undoing the button and her fingers strayed inside his shirt. Elly caught her breath as she felt the crisp, curly hair. Impulsively she put her lips to the base of his throat.

"Elly, honey—"

"I've missed you, Jess." She kissed him again, this time on his jaw. Her fingers slipped around his neck.

"I missed you, too," he whispered.

Elly thought she heard him sigh softly into her hair. She leaned more heavily into him, letting him feel the shape of her soft, unconfined breasts on his hard chest. She could feel his body tightening as she snuggled against him. "I've done a lot of thinking this week, Jess."

"Have you?" His hand lifted to her hair again, and this time he removed a couple of pins.

"There are some things we've never talked about," she ventured, closing her eyes as she felt her hair coming free.

"And you've been worrying about them?"

"Yes."

"Elly, honey, there's no need to worry. We've got all the time in the world. Everything's on schedule."

"I know that, but—" She broke off, unable to put her fears into words. A little desperately she found his mouth with her own, praying for a response. She had to find out just what he felt for her. Her whole future depended on the answer. Inching her way into Jess's lap, she curled against him and opened her mouth invitingly beneath his. Her desire was naked now, and she moaned softly against his mouth, a wordless plea that was also an unwitting, very feminine form of seduction. Then she caught his hand in one of her own. Trembling, she guided his fingers under the edge of her sweater.

Jess sucked in his breath. Beneath her thigh Elly was now aware of his

growing arousal. Shivering with nervous relief and exhilaration, she urged his hand higher.

"Please, Jess. Please touch me. I—I need you. I want you to need me." She trembled in his arms.

Jess groaned. "Elly, honey, I didn't plan it to be like this."

"But, Jess, this is the way it's supposed to be," she whispered. "Make love to me, Jess. Please. I'm begging you."

"Oh, God, Elly. I don't—I didn't want— You don't know what you're asking."

But his hand closed over her breast with a sensual possessiveness Elly had never known in him before. He did want her. The fire she had sensed in him did exist.

Elly almost sobbed in relief, and then she felt the room shift as Jess lowered her onto the sofa cushions. A moment later he came down on top of her. The firelight clearly revealed the hunger in his face.

It was going to be all right, Jess thought as the need in him flared into heavy and demanding life. There had been nothing to worry about after all. Elly wanted him. The desire in her was not a false spell she wove to ensnare him. It was genuine and it made her so sweetly vulnerable.

Beneath him Jess could feel the gentle swell of Elly's breasts. The need to see and touch her small, excitingly hard nipples came over him in a rush, and he pulled the sweater up over her head, letting the garment drop to the floor. He inhaled fiercely as the fire's glow spilled over her bare breasts.

"Ah, Elly, my sweet Elly. You're so lovely."

She shivered as he brushed his thumb across one thrusting peak. Her reaction to his touch heightened Jess's excitement and he lifted his head to see that her eyes were half-closed against the exquisite need building in her. Along the length of his leg her jeaned thigh tightened, her knee flexing slightly.

It was a fantastic sensation, Jess thought, half-dazed. To think he had planned to keep sex on an easy, comfortable basis that would satisfy each of them physically but not demand too much emotionally. He'd had more than one such association since Marina had left. But it wasn't until tonight, when she had begged him to make love to her, that Jess realized the sexual relationship with Elly wasn't going to be casual. Her own need and passion were pulling him into the heart of a whirlwind. There was no aphrodisiac on earth that could compare to being wanted the way Elly seemed to want him tonight.

Elly didn't know which was stronger, the dizzy sensation of relief and exultation or the flaring physical excitement. In the end it didn't matter. She was aware she had fallen in love with Jess Winter, and the physical side was glorious, the most incredible sensation she'd ever known.

She felt the hard readiness of Jess's body through the fabric of her jeans. He had his shirt off now and the strong, sleek slopes of his shoulders were golden in the firelight. He crushed her deeply into the sofa cushions, his

fingers in her hair. He nipped passionately at the line of her throat.

"Your hair has fire in it," he told her, a long tendril of it around one nipple. The teasing caress elicited another soft sound from Elly.

"Jess, I've been so worried," she confided as she tightened her arms around his neck. "I was afraid you didn't want me."

"That's the last thing you have to worry about now." He was kissing her with drugging desire.

Elly sighed. Loving Jess was going to be all she could have hoped. She was certain of that now.

And then, with no warning, Elly's fiery world of love and passion froze into a solid sheet of ice. Jess had gone utterly still above her.

"*Marina!*" The name seemed to be wrenched from his throat. "Damn it to hell. *Marina!*"

"What is it, Jess? What's wrong?" Elly opened her eyes to see the savagely drawn features of the man who had only a moment before been making love to her. He was staring past her toward the living room window. And then he was pulling himself free of her.

"Jess!" Elly struggled to a sitting position and crossed her arms over her breasts.

But Jess was already halfway across the room. He unlatched the window and shoved it open, chill fog sliding eagerly into the cozy room.

"Jess, where are you going?" Horrified, Elly sprang to her feet as he disappeared out the door. She stood staring after him, then started toward the window. Her toe snagged on her

sweater and she retrieved it, shrugging into it quickly.

The window got stuck as usual, but Elly got it closed and latched. Nothing was visible through the fog.

What had Jess seen that had sent him into the night? Prowlers? But *Marina*. It was a woman's name. She shivered.

Elly was still standing at the window when the door behind her opened. She whirled to find Jess on the threshold. His naked chest was damp from exertion or the fog, and when his wintry eyes met hers, Elly knew she was looking at a man changed from lover to stranger.

"What happened, Jess? Did you see someone at the window?"

He broke the eye contact, turning to lock the door. When he turned back, something in her expression must have gotten through to him. He started forward, but stopped when she backed up a pace.

"It's all right, Elly. I'm sorry I scared you."

"What did you see?"

He rubbed his eyes. "A face. I thought I saw someone at the window. But I couldn't find a thing." His hand dropped from his face.

"If you saw a prowler I should call Charlie." Elly reached for the phone.

"Charlie? Oh, yeah. The local deputy sheriff. Forget it, Elly. You can't see two feet in front of yourself tonight. By the time Charlie got here... hell, whoever it was is long gone now." Jess dropped into an armchair and stared at the fire.

Behind him Elly stayed very still, watching this stranger. He just wasn't

the man she had come to know during the past two months. The realization was frightening.

"Jess, who did you think it was? You called her *Marina*."

He didn't respond to that. Slowly Elly moved closer to his chair. Her hands were shaking. "Jess?"

"I'm sorry, Elly."

She shook her head. "Who is *Marina*?"

It was a while before he answered her, and then she got the feeling he was trying to convince himself, too. "I didn't see *Marina* outside that window. Just someone who looked like her."

Elly licked her lower lip. "What does she look like?"

"A witch," he finally said. "A blond-haired, green-eyed witch."

Elly closed her eyes. "I see."

"No, you don't. You can't possibly. She was my ex-wife."

*

ELLY HAD a hard time getting her next breath. Even then, her voice sounded faint. "I didn't realize you had been married." She sank down onto the couch.

"It's not something I talk about."

"Obviously!" Elly then asked tentatively, "Children?"

"No. I wouldn't have kept quiet about children, Elly."

"Just ex-wives?"

"There was no need to mention *Marina*. She's dead, Elly."

Elly closed her eyes in sudden anguish. "Oh, my God. And when you started to make love to me, you saw a vision of her at the window."

The words snapped Jess out of his brooding state. He surged out of the chair and crossed the room to her in three angry strides.

"No," he bit out savagely, "I did not see a *vision*. I saw someone who looked a lot like her at that window. For crying out loud, Elly, what the hell do you think is going on?"

"You tell me. All I know is that one minute you're making love to me, and the next you're seeing your ex-wife at the window. What do you expect me to think?"

"I expect you to be rational about it," Jess grated, hauling her to her feet. "Someone at the window bore a resemblance to a woman I married and divorced a few years ago. That's all. In the morning I'll see if I can find any signs of the prowler, though it's not likely."

"No," she admitted politely, letting him construe her agreement as he wished. "Well," she said, "it's getting late, isn't it? And it will be a slow drive back to your motel in this fog. You'd better get started. Give me a call in the morning." She went over to the hall closet and began pulling out Jess's worn leather jacket.

"Elly!" he yanked it out of her hands, replacing it in the closet. "I'm not driving anywhere in this fog."

Elly realized he was right. It was her own agitation that had made her try to push him out. But she was trapped with him, perhaps until morning. Earlier the prospect had seemed inviting. Now it held uncertainty and a nameless fear.

She had to get hold of herself. Taking a deep breath, Elly stalked across

the room and picked up her brandy glass. The fiery liquid was a welcome and reviving sensation.

"I could use another drink myself." Jess's voice was a low growl as he poured himself more brandy. He stood with his feet wide apart, one hand on his hips, and downed a healthy swallow.

Elly eyed him covertly, thinking he looked very pagan. She wished he would put on his shirt. Belatedly she handed it to him. "Here. You're probably cold from running around outside without any clothes on."

Her comment brought a twist of humor to his mouth. "I wasn't exactly naked." Nevertheless, he put on the shirt. "Sit down, honey. I can see I've got some explaining to do."

"I don't know if I want to hear—"

"Sit down, damn it!"

Elly's mouth tightened, but she took a seat. Jess stood in front of the fireplace and began talking in a low, detached tone of voice.

"I met Marina Carrington when I was thirty-two and had the world in the palm of my hand. I had proven to myself that I was going to be a success in business, but when Marina swept into my life I knew what I'd been missing. Excitement. In capital letters. It's very seductive at first, maybe even addictive."

"Excitement?"

"That shot of adrenaline only a creature like Marina can give you. It's sexual and it's very exhilarating. A man never knows what's going to happen next, but he knows it's going to be wild. You've got to understand, Elly. I had gotten where I was by a lot of hard

work, ambition and self-control. Marina turned everything upside down."

Elly looked down at her clasped hands. "I see."

Jess glanced at her, frowning. "I'm trying to explain something that's hard to put into words. Marina was the kind of woman who, when she walked into a room, immediately had the attention of everyone there. Charisma is probably the word for it. And it seemed to run in the Carrington family."

"It did?"

"Marina had a twin brother. Women react to him the way men react to her. Same blond hair and green eyes, the same sense of being bigger than life. And both Marina and Damon knew how to exploit their assets. They manipulated everyone around them so easily that most people never even realized it until it was too late."

"A witch and a warlock," Elly whispered.

"That's exactly how I came to think of them," Jess admitted.

"Go on," Elly said with a sense of doom.

"Well, Marina exploded into my life one evening when I was introduced to her at a party. She was very beautiful, very chic and very successful in her own right. She held an executive position in a corporation, though not purely on merit. Marina used her body to get what she wanted. She knew how to tease and torment and then satisfy a man. She would make me wildly jealous, and then laugh at me until I lost control. The battles always ended in bed. She was... very skilled in bed. I thought that if I could put a ring on her

finger I could possess her completely."

Elly wrinkled her nose and sighed. "Did you?"

"Of course not. Things only got worse. Now that she was my wife, she began going through my money at an incredible rate. I finally began to get suspicious."

"Of what?"

"That she was giving the money to her brother. Damon was plunging into one crazy business scheme after another, using my money as capital. Before I knew it, I found myself bailing him out time after time."

"I gather that when you finally realized how much money was involved you came to your senses?" Elly knew that sarcasm simmered in her voice, but she was feeling too much pain to worry.

Jess's expression darkened. He took another long swallow of brandy. "It wasn't just the money. By then I was also growing sick of Marina's brand of thrills. I wasn't reacting to the old cycle of glazing jealousy followed by blazing sex. And when I cut off the endless supply of cash, she opted to head for greener pastures. I was already filing for divorce."

"Sounds like the parting of the ways was a mutual decision. How modern."

The line of Jess's jaw seemed to tighten but he didn't respond to her sarcasm. "She left my life the way she had entered it—on the arm of another man. I was incredibly relieved to see her go. And to be rid of her twin. Yet I guess I owe them both something."

Elly's eyes widened. "What do you owe them?"

Jess's mouth twisted wryly. "It was during the aftermath that I started thinking of easing my way out of the business world and into another kind of environment."

"That was when you decided you should run a quaint little inn on the coast?"

"That's when the idea began to crystallize, yes. But I also knew I no longer wanted the kind of destructive excitement a man gets from a woman like Marina."

"You decided you wanted a placid, serene, controlled sort of existence, is that it?" Elly asked tightly. "And when you met me you decided I'd be just the kind of unexciting sort of wife to fit into that life-style."

"Elly, you're twisting my words."

"Am I?" she said, flaring. "When for two months you haven't shown much interest in making love to the woman you said you wanted to marry. And when I decide to find out if you're ever going to want to, the first thing you see is Marina's ghost. You did say she was dead, didn't you? When did she die?"

Jess moved toward her. "I heard she was killed in a boating accident a couple of years ago. Elly, I want you to listen to me. I wasn't seeing ghosts tonight." He tried to pull her into his arms. "I saw someone who looked a little like her. That's all."

"You called to her," Elly reminded him bleakly as she got to her feet.

"Hell, I was startled. It's always startling to see a face at a window. Especially one that looks familiar. Elly,

you're making too much out of this. I want you to calm down and forget about it."

"That's not likely, is it? And how do you know it's not like me to get this upset? Even we serene, placid, unexciting types occasionally have our moments."

"Elly, you're losing your temper."

"Damn right." She shoved her trembling fingers into the back pockets of her jeans and stood facing him. Jess reached out and tugged her gently but forcefully against him, his arms locking around her. Helpless, she stood stiffly, aware of her captor's lips in her hair.

"You won't drive me away with a show of temper, honey. I know you too well. Believe me, after the Carringtons, I became an excellent judge of human nature. I know you're exactly the kind of woman I want and need. When you've calmed down you'll realize that I'll be a good husband for you."

"If you really think I'd marry you after what happened tonight...!"

Very gently Jess put his fingers against her mouth. He shook his head. "Don't say things you'll only regret in the morning. Trust me, honey. I know we're going to have a good marriage."

"Well, I don't know that. And you can give up any idea that I'll make a decision this weekend. I want more time, Jess. It seems there's a lot I don't know about you."

"That's not true, Elly. You know the real me."

She lifted her head, her eyes overly bright from unshed tears. "Do I? What if you get a craving for the old

style of excitement? What if you start seeing Marina's ghost in our bedroom? I'm not sure I can cope with that, Jess."

His face hardened. "Stop it, Elly."

She moved away from him, and he let her go. "You can have the sofa. There are some sheets and blankets in the hall closet. Help yourself." Without waiting for him to respond, she turned toward the staircase. He caught up with her.

"Elly, you're upset and you're overreacting. I don't think you should spend the night alone."

Half in shock and half in sudden fury, she said, "Are you by any chance offering to reassure me in bed?"

"Why not? After all, what's really changed?"

Elly was beginning to seethe. "Your generosity overwhelms me. But I just don't think I can handle all this excitement. Good night, Jess."

She flung herself up the stairs and into her bedroom, locking the door behind her. Then, trembling violently, she collapsed onto the bed.

THE TELEPHONE downstairs next morning woke Elly. She opened her door to hear Jess tell the caller that she was still asleep.

"It's all right, Jess," she called. "I'll take it." Hastily fastening her red flannel robe, she traipsed barefoot down the stairs. Even her robe suited Jess's image of her, she thought. Not particularly sexy or exciting, but reliable and comfortable.

Jess stood holding the phone, his expression intent. He was already

dressed, and she wondered how late it was.

"Hello?" she said. "Oh, it's you, Aunt Clara."

"Elly, dear, I'm calling to tell you that the family has made its decision." Her aunt's tone was aloof, arrogant.

"I see." Elly glanced at Jess, who was listening unabashedly. "And what is the decision?"

"We have decided to sell Trentco Switches. I want you to be prepared to vote at the meeting. We must present a united front. You know Harrigan will fight us."

Good for Harrigan, Elly thought. But she said, "Thank you for telling me, Aunt Clara. I'll certainly take it into consideration."

"Come now, Elly, you know there's no need." Aunt Clara's tone was suddenly sharp. "It will be best for all concerned if you refrain from causing trouble. You have no knowledge of this sort of thing. What could you possibly know about buyouts and merger offers? And if it had been your mother calling this morning she would have been shocked."

Elly bristled. "Why, Aunt Clara?"

"You know perfectly well that a man answered your phone this morning. I have to assume that's a regular occurrence these days. Only to be expected, considering your sort of life-style. But I suppose that's your business."

"Yes, Aunt Clara. Since I'm thirty years old and self-supporting, I'd say it is. Now, I appreciate your informing me of your decision. I will take it under advisement. Goodbye, Aunt Clara."

She hung up and stalked toward the kitchen. "Any coffee?"

"Not yet. I just came in from outside. I wanted to see if I could find any trace of last night's visitor."

"And did you?"

"Afraid not. It rained around four, so any evidence was long gone. Don't look at me like that, Elly," Jess added. "There really was someone out there."

"I'm not going to argue the point. Lord knows I've got enough of an argument on my hands as it is."

"Something to do with your Aunt Clara?"

"Aunt Clara and most of my other relatives except my parents who are, thank goodness, out of the country."

"What's the problem?"

Elly sighed. "It's a long story. And I have to be at work in an hour." She hovered grimly over the coffee machine, waiting for it to brew.

"You can talk and make breakfast at the same time."

"Good grief. You're as bad as Aunt Clara. Why is everyone in my life so damned arrogant?"

"I think of it as being assertive." Jess smiled benignly.

"Maybe I should take notes on assertiveness. It certainly seems to work for the rest of you," Elly grumbled. She poured the coffee.

"Oh? Is it going to work for your aunt, then?"

"Not if I can help it. If she thinks I'm going to sell off the family inheritance, she's out of her mind," Elly said.

"What puts you in that position?"

Elly groaned. "You never give up, do you?" She took cereal and milk

over to the table and they both sat down.

"I told you—assertiveness."

It was Elly who gave up. "I'll give you a summary. My father's brother, Uncle Toby, founded a company called Trentco. When he died he left a sizable block of shares to me—controlling interest, in fact. Uncle Toby had a hunch his other relatives would sell off the company if they got the chance, and he wanted to see it kept intact for the next generation of Trents. He had hopes that I or my cousin Dave, or even one of the younger kids, might take charge of the firm someday. Now the family has had a good offer for Trentco, and they all have delusions of instant wealth. But I'm not going to vote to sell the company because my cousin Dave has shown a serious interest in it. He's studying business, and he seems to have real aptitude. In a few more years he'll be able to handle it. He has every right to his inheritance."

"So you'll hold firm against Aunt Clara and the crowd?"

"Who all think I'm the product of an overly liberal education—an impractical, left-wing dropout of uncertain morals—except that now Aunt Clara is no longer uncertain."

"Because I answered the phone? You should have told her you were going to marry me."

"But I don't know that I am," Elly retorted.

"Sure you are. All you have to do is admit that nothing has changed. Then everything can return to normal."

"It's because things weren't exactly normal between us that I started getting nervous in the first place!"

"Hence the big seduction scene last night?"

She flushed. "I'm sure it must have been quite tame as seduction scenes go—I mean, considering what you're accustomed to."

Jess didn't move, but the change in him was unmistakable. "Believe it or not, I've never had a woman ask me so sweetly or so honestly to make love to her. I'm used to games in that line, Elly, but I find I like the real thing very much. I'd like another chance."

Elly lurched to her feet and dropped her dishes into the sink. "I've got to get ready for work, Jess. Excuse me while I get dressed. Perhaps I'll, uh, see you later or something."

"You know damn well you're going to see me later, Elly," he said, but she was already halfway to the stairs.

THE NATURAL CHOICE was one of those small-town stores that is a meeting place for people who live nearby. In addition to buying the flours, grains, tofu and other assorted grocery products Elly stocked, local people dropped in to chat, catch up on news or just hang out. Everyone in the community knew of Jess Winter and his plans for the old mansion. They also knew Elly had been dating him steadily for two months. She was prepared for casual inquiries, though she could have done without them today.

"How's your friend, Elly? Thought I saw him over at Wilson's this morning?" Sarah Mitchell hoisted a gurgling eighteen-month-old baby onto her hip and reached for her wallet. The baby, known as Compass Rose and too

young to object, was dressed in a handknitted jumpsuit.

"I think he said something about wanting Wilson to do some woodwork in the hall," Elly murmured.

"Is he still going to want the stained-glass work?" Sarah asked a little uncertainly.

Elly smiled. "Don't worry, Sarah, once he makes a commitment like that he follows through."

Sarah looked relieved. "Good. I could use the work."

"No check this month?" Elly asked.

The other woman shook her head. "No, and I think I'd better get used to it. Mark is long gone, Elly. He's not coming back. And I can't treat the stained glass as a hobby any longer. I've got to start making it pay. Or find other work."

"Jess will pay you well, Sarah. Don't worry," Elly said gently.

"Your Jess is a good man, Elly."

"Yes." Yes, Elly thought, Jess was a good man. His integrity was one of the things that had made her fall in love with him. She just wished he was in love with her the same way—wildly, passionately, head-over-heels in love.

"Well, tell him I'm available whenever he wants me to start designing. I'll—" Sarah broke off as the bell over the door chimed. "Good heavens," she went on in a low tone. "Where did he come from?"

Elly turned and found herself blinking in astonishment at the newcomer. Sarah was still staring, too.

The man in the doorway nodded easily, and strode forward with a nonchalance that said he was accustomed to being the center of attention. He was

the handsomest male Elly had ever seen. Tall, lean, with curly blond hair and perfectly chiseled features, he had a casual, inviting smile and the promise of excitement in his green eyes.

Green eyes, Elly thought suddenly. But there was no time to dwell on the bizarre notion that had just struck her. The man had reached the counter and was focusing the full force of his attention on Compass Rose.

"Hey, beautiful," he murmured to the wide-eyed toddler. "Where have you been all my life?"

"Her name is Compass Rose," Sarah explained.

"Something tells me she's going to lead a lot of men astray during the next few years." With one finger he chuckled the baby under her chin.

Rose's eyes got even wider as, without warning, she started to wail. Turning her face into her mother's shirt, she clung fiercely, her high-pitched cry filling the shop.

"What in the world?" Startled, Sarah cradled the child closer. "She's usually very good with strangers. I don't know what could have gotten into her. I guess I better get her out of here. Thanks, Elly. You won't forget to remind Jess, will you?"

"I won't forget," Elly mouthed above the baby's wails.

"Well," the stranger said as the door closed. "I guess I'm not that good with the younger set." He smiled at Elly. "But I'm hell on wheels with older women."

Elly blinked owlshly and said, "Perhaps you'd like to meet my Aunt Clara. She's in her sixties."

Green eyes flashed wickedly. "I had in mind something midrange."

Elly summoned up a polite, shopkeeper's smile. "Did you? Well, I'm sure you'll find it. Let me know if you need any assistance while shopping."

"I'm only looking for one item." He didn't move from the counter. "I came here to meet someone."

"I'm afraid I don't—"

"Nothing to be concerned about," the stranger said easily. "I've got lots of time." Then he reached out, just as he had to the baby, and caught Elly lightly under her chin.

She was so startled that before she could react to the overfamiliar touch, the shop bell chimed again.

Far too gently, Jess closed the door and stood taking in Elly's wary expression as the other man's hand dropped from her chin. Then he glanced at the newcomer.

Elly's pulse was racing as she watched Jess walk calmly down the aisle to where she stood. Then he was leaning across the counter to kiss her.

Elly didn't resist, but she knew her lips must have been as cold as his. This was not a kiss of warmth or even casual affection. This was a public announcement for the benefit of the other man. Coolly, Jess turned to confront him.

"Well, Carrington, I would have been happy never to see you again. But I guess that was too much to hope for. What the hell brings you here?"

Damon Carrington smiled, and Elly cringed inwardly.

"Is that any way to greet family?" he asked mildly.

"You're not family. Not anymore," Jess said. "What do you want?"

"What makes you so sure I want something?"

"It's your nature."

Damon considered that. "Maybe you're right. But I expected to have to work at this a little." He glanced at Elly. "Maybe you've got other little projects you wouldn't want jeopardized. She's not too bad, Jess. Not in Marina's league, of course." He started to lift his hand again toward Elly's chin.

Jess didn't move. "Touch her and I'll kill you, Carrington."

The threat hovered in the air, and Damon's eyes narrowed in amusement, but he dropped his hand. "Well, well. This is serious, isn't it?"

"I think it's time for you to leave, Carrington. Elly is going to close the shop." He pinned her with his glance.

Elly didn't even make a pretense of resisting, but began readying the cash register.

"No need to run, Winter. I can find you easily enough. It's a small town, isn't it? A little too small for you."

"Small towns have their advantages. It's easy to keep track of unwanted strangers. Keep that in mind."

Damon shook his head sadly. "You surprise me, Winter. I would have expected you to stay in the fast lane. Now look at you, getting ready to run an inn in a sleepy little village. Picked just the right kind of woman, too. She looks sweet, Winter. Maybe a little too sweet for you. I never— Hey! Damn you, what the hell . . . ?"

Jess had Damon flattened against the wall before Elly realized what had

happened. His voice was a harsh whisper.

"Get out of here, Carrington. Don't let me see you again. And if you come near Elly I promise you I'll make you pay."

Damon hissed, "Pay? You owe me! For what you did to Marina!"

"I didn't do a damn thing except divorce her. And she was tired of me anyway. Are you crazy, Carrington?"

"She'd be alive today if it hadn't been for you. You cut her off without a penny."

"So? She socked away plenty while she and I were married. Not my fault if she didn't invest it! You *are* crazy."

"She wouldn't have had to sleep with that old bastard if it hadn't been for the way you left her high and dry."

"I get it," Jess said wearily. "Then she wouldn't have been on his yacht when it capsized. Therefore, it's all my fault. Is that your logic?" Jess released him. "Get away from me. I don't want to see you near Elly again. *Get out of here!*"

Damon moved warily away and the chime sounded as the door closed behind him. Elly jumped at the noise.

"What?"

"You said the Carringtons brought excitement into one's life. I don't think I'm into excitement, Jess. Not if that's a sample."

Jess looked down at her, his eyes fierce. "And you're not going to get 'into' it. I don't want you in the same room with Damon Carrington. Stay out of his way. Do you understand me, Elly?"

"I understand." She would, Elly thought, because she loved Jess too

much ever to let herself be used against him. But a part of her wished he loved her so passionately that he might truly be vulnerable to the fear of losing her to another man.

*

ON MONDAY morning Elly took a walk on the beach before opening *The Natural Choice*. Jess had left for Portland the previous evening. At least he'd stopped pressuring her for an answer to his proposal. He finally seemed to sense that she needed more time.

There had been no sign of Damon Carrington since Saturday afternoon. No one in town had seen him and that reassured Jess. Elly had a hunch that Jess would otherwise have found an excuse to stay. Had Damon been the face at her window that night?

The tide was out this morning, and Elly took pleasure in exploring the nooks and crannies that were underwater at other times. The beach here was rocky, the small cove dominated by a huge boulder that crouched aloofly in the center. When the tide was in, foaming water surged around it, acting like a moat around a castle. But this morning it stood undefended, open to anyone who was willing to cross the damp, packed sand.

Elly had explored the rock castle before. Starfish clung to its base, and various crustaceans scampered over it in an endless quest for food.

The sea was an alien world to Elly. It was all very well to study its creatures while they were exposed and vulnerable. The thought of meeting them in their natural environment while the tide was in struck a primitive chord of

genuine fear. The power of the surging waves was equally disturbing. Elly could swim, but she never swam in the sea. Not since that terrifying afternoon on a southern California beach.

But this morning she poked around the huge boulder, her mind occupied with the problem of Jess Winter. Last night, he had offered to represent her in the Trentco matter. The drawback to bringing him into the thorny family situation was that it meant involving him more deeply in her life at a time when Elly was wondering if it wouldn't be best to end the relationship.

THERE WAS A potluck supper on Wednesday evening and Elly drove the several miles to the farm site. Ann Palmer and her husband, Jim, had recently moved to Oregon from California and were intent on pursuing a back-to-the-land life-style.

"Elly! There you are. I was wondering where you were." Ann Palmer approached to take the casserole her guest had brought. "Next month we all expect Jess to accompany you to these gala social bashes."

"If all goes according to schedule," Elly agreed. "And where Jess is concerned, nearly everything does." She glanced around at the craftsmen, artists, farmers and boutique proprietors and wondered whether Jess knew what he was getting into socially. Probably. He always seemed to know what he was doing.

Half an hour later Elly was in the middle of an intense discussion about growing one's own sprouts when the room went quiet all at once. Instinctively Elly glanced toward the door.

Damon Carrington stood in the doorway, smiling in secret amusement as everyone stared. He was dressed all in black, a lock of blond hair curled rakishly over one brow. At his side was Sarah Mitchell, looking happier than Elly had seen her since Mark left.

Elly watched her friend in dismay, but the Carrington charm was obviously at work. Little Compass Rose had clearly been left with a sitter and Elly wondered if the child had wailed again at Damon.

The hum of activity started up again, and Elly excused herself to get some more salad. Her pleasure in the friendly evening had just evaporated. Damon Carrington was still around and that, she knew, meant trouble.

By ten o'clock the crowd began to break up. Sarah left with Damon and Elly worried for her friend, but she didn't know what to do. It seemed cruel to step in and try to blight the one spark that had come into her life. You couldn't make other people's decisions for them, Elly told herself as she helped Ann Palmer clean up.

"Drive carefully, Elly. The fog is starting to get heavy out there."

"Don't worry, I'll be careful. It was a lovely evening."

"That Carrington man certainly livened things up, didn't he? He's almost too good-looking somehow."

Elly nodded. "I agree with you. It's as if he's not quite real. Or quite human."

The interior of the car was cold, and the engine reluctant. When she finally got it going, Elly sat for a few minutes, letting the heater warm up. Then,

headlights dim, she started down the narrow country road.

It was slow going, and Elly told herself to relax and take her time. Elly turned on the radio for company. The road had no other traffic.

She was singing along to a country and western song when the car's engine sputtered and died. Elly let the vehicle drift to the side of the road and tried to restart the engine. But the task was hopeless. She seemed to be out of gas.

The only way to get home was to walk, not a pleasant prospect. She was about equidistant from the Palmers' and her own place, so she might as well head home.

One of these days, Elly promised herself as she climbed out and buttoned her parka, she must remember to carry a flashlight in the glove compartment.

JESS ALMOST pounced on the phone when it rang that evening. He'd been trying to reach Elly since six o'clock.

"Mr. Winter, this is Mary at your service."

His answering service. Elly never used that number unless she couldn't reach him at home. He'd been home all evening. "Go ahead, Mary," he said.

"You just had a call from a man who refused to leave his name. He said you'd know who it was. He said to tell you it was going to be an interesting night on the coast and that he'll have her home by morning."

Carrington. The secret fear he hadn't wanted to acknowledge had become real.

The hell of it was, Carrington could have taken Elly anywhere. Women went with him so easily, like moths to a flame.

Quite suddenly, Jess realized he'd have to go to the coast. He had to be waiting at Elly's home in the morning when Carrington brought her back. Then he would tear Damon Carrington apart.

ELLY HEARD the faint sound of a car's engine before she had gone very far along the road. She glanced over her shoulder and caught the glare of headlights in the swirling fog. Relief swept through her as she turned and started back.

She was never certain what instinct made her decide to identify the vehicle before she darted out to hail it. Perhaps it was the knowledge that not everyone on this road might be familiar or perhaps it was the eeriness of the swirling fog.

Elly scrambled down into the ditch by the road and up the other side. There she stood behind the cover of brush and a small clump of trees and watched as the oncoming headlights stopped beside her car. She squinted, trying to make out the color of the other vehicle. Beyond the glaring lights, it looked sleek and sporty. A Porsche, perhaps.

No one she knew drove a Porsche.

Then a man climbed out of the front seat. Damon Carrington.

He walked to the front door of her little compact and yanked it open. "Elly?"

She crouched lower behind the brush.

"Elly? It's me, Damon Carrington. Looks like you had car trouble. I can give you a lift home. Where are you?"

He was calling to her on the hunch she might still be in the vicinity, Elly reassured herself. He couldn't know for certain.

"Elly?" The helpfulness of his tone was replaced by impatience. Damon walked a few paces down the road in front of the cars, peering into the fog. He was assuming she had continued walking.

"Elly!" After that last call, he must have decided he was wasting his time, and Elly watched in relief as he slid inside the Porsche. A moment later the sleek car slipped into the fog and disappeared.

She was getting paranoid and it was all Jess Winter's fault. But she'd rather walk home in the fog than take a free ride from the man Jess hated.

Not that Jess was ever likely to find out about tonight's odd events, Elly thought as she finally came in sight of the welcoming light from her front porch.

The door opened before she could dig her key out, and Elly found herself staring up into Jess Winter's taut, savage face. The tension in him was lethal.

"Elly."

She blinked, alarmed by the harshness of her name on his lips. She stepped forward into her warm, inviting hall. "Well, of course it's Elly. I live here, remember? What in the world are you doing here on a Wednesday, Jess? My God, it's cold out there. My legs are absolutely numb. You wouldn't believe what

happened to me tonight. I ran out of gas. And I could have sworn I had plenty. I just filled the tank on Monday..."

"Elly! Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Just a little cold."

Jess stepped forward, his hands clamping her shoulders. The tension in him frightened her.

"I had a message from Carrington," he began grimly. "To tell me you were spending the night with him, and he would bring you home in the morning."

Images of Damon Carrington prowling through the fog took on new, menacing significance. "I was at the Palmers' tonight, Jess. I ran out of gas."

Suddenly he pulled her fiercely into his arms. Elly thought he would crush the breath out of her body.

"I would have killed him, Elly. I would have strangled him with my bare hands if he..."

"Jess," she whispered, wrapping her arms around his neck, "how could you think I would go with him?"

"You don't know him, Elly."

"I know one thing—he's not the man I want. And I resent your thinking that I'm some empty-headed female who's an easy victim for any good-looking man that comes along."

"Elly, hush."

"Why should I hush? In addition to integrity and brains, I've also got a mouth."

"You can say that again!"

Before Elly could protest further, Jess stopped her tirade with a kiss that wasn't the casual sort she had come to expect. His hands were already mov-

ing in her hair, even as his tongue surged possessively between her teeth.

This time, Elly knew, Jess intended to set his seal on her. He was going to take her to bed.

"Elly," he muttered against her mouth. "I should have done this a long time ago. I see that now." His tongue probed boldly into her mouth once more, and Elly moaned beneath the sensual onslaught.

His strong hands slid down her back, and when he reached her waist Jess lifted her, pulling her up into the urgent hardness of his lower body.

At least there was no doubt that he wanted her, Elly thought dazedly. She clung to that knowledge as fiercely as she clung to him. If she could make him want her badly enough, perhaps he would let himself love her.

"Sweetheart, you're still cold. I'm going to take you upstairs and warm you." Jess cradled her in his arms as he started toward the stairs. In the shadows of her room he set her down while he yanked the comforter out of the way. When he turned back to her she smiled.

"You're very sweet, Elly Trent. Very soft. And I think the time has come for me to take what you're offering." He trailed his fingertip inside the collar of her shirt until he came to the first button. Then he began unfastening the buttons, letting his knuckles glide teasingly over her skin.

By the time the shirt hung open, Elly was trembling. She whispered his name and brought his hand to her lips, kissing his palm with a gentle passion that made him catch his breath.

"I'm glad you want me," Elly said, her eyes luminous. "So glad." She stepped out of her shoes.

He pushed the shirt to one side, uncovering a breast. "The important thing is that you want me. Tonight you're going to show me just how much, aren't you?"

"Jess, this isn't a contest. There's nothing to prove."

"Yes, there is." He stroked her nipple, watching it harden beneath his touch. "Yes, there is." The satisfaction was plain on his face as he pushed the shirt off completely. Then he captured her wrist and guided her hand to his own garment. "Help me undress, Elly."

She began easing him out of his shirt, her fingers a little shaky. Jess watched her slow progress with a curiously intent expression.

"Now," he murmured as the shirt fell to his feet, "put your arms around my neck and hold me. I want to feel you, honey."

Elly gasped when her breasts brushed against the crisp curly hair of his chest.

"Harder," Jess ordered softly, his lips in her hair.

"Oh, Jess." Elly shuddered as she pressed closer. Her nipples felt hard and almost unbearably sensitized. The feel of his rough skin against them bordered on the painful. "It hurts," she breathed.

"Does it?"

"Almost."

He laughed softly and she curled her arms more trustingly around his neck. Then Elly was aware of Jess's fingers moving between their bodies. He

found the snap of her jeans, pushed them down over her hips, and let them drop to her feet. She felt his hands on her buttocks, clenching and unclenching tenderly. Only her briefs shielded her now.

"Jess, I'm going crazy." She pressed more closely against him.

"That's just the way I want you. Let yourself go, Elly. Show me how much you want me."

She snuggled closer, dropping her hands to his waist, but she fumbled so with the zipper that Jess finally stepped back to do the job himself.

"Get into bed, honey. You're still too cold."

She crawled between the sheets, pulling the comforter up and watching as Jess stepped out of the rest of his clothes. In the shadows, his body looked lean and smoothly muscled, and when he turned to face her the hard evidence of his desire was so blatant Elly's glance moved to his face. He pulled aside the comforter and slid into bed.

"Why the shyness, Elly? We're going to be married soon. You want me. I want you. It's all very simple. It would have been even simpler if I'd come to my senses earlier." Jess let his fingers trail beneath the elastic of her briefs. "Lift up, honey and let me take these off."

"Jess, I'm sorry you were worried about me tonight."

"I know that."

Elly's briefs came off in his hands, and he dropped them casually beside the bed. Then Jess let his palm glide up the length of her leg until he reached her thigh.

"Open up, sweetheart. Let me touch you. I want to feel you get hot and damp for me." He bent his head and caught her nipple between his lips.

"Jess!" The exquisite sensation made her arch her head back over his arm, and with no conscious thought her legs parted for him. Elly speared her fingers into his hair, gripping with sudden urgency as he probed her softness.

"I can't believe I denied myself this for two months. You're on fire, aren't you, Elly?"

"You're tormenting me," she protested. "And I think you're doing it deliberately."

Jess looked down into her eyes. "Maybe I am," he admitted quietly. "I like seeing how much you want me."

Through the gathering storm of her arousal, Elly caught his hidden meaning. "Because you feel in control? Jess, please, I don't want this to be a matter of control."

"What do you want it to be?" He feathered her throat with kisses.

"It should be a giving thing," she tried to say, but then he did something incredibly erotic between her legs. "Jess, please . . . !"

"I agree, sweetheart. I want you to give yourself to me. Ah, sweet Elly, you're delicious, do you know that? You're losing yourself in my arms. You're going out of control."

He was right. Elly decided there was no point trying to fight her reaction to him. The passion he aroused in her was unique. With a soft moan, Elly gave herself up to the excitement of Jess's lovemaking. She slid her hands eagerly over his body, exploring the lean

muscled contours until she came into contact with the rock-hard shaft of his manhood. Jess's eyes momentarily narrowed until they were almost closed.

"Oh, Elly, yes. I want you. I can't remember ever wanting a woman like this."

She sensed that the admission was almost unconscious on his part. Jess, too, was slipping out of control, and the realization set fire to Elly's own excitement.

"Jess?"

"Hush, darling." He eased her onto her back and lowered himself along the length of her. "I'm going to take you now. I'm going to watch you melt in my arms. You said this should be a giving thing. So give, Elly. I'll take good care of the gift."

She was too far gone along the sensual road to struggle with the message in his words. Elly could feel his hard, blunt shaft waiting between her thighs, and when he used his hand to push her legs farther apart she didn't resist. Then he surged against her, and she cried out as he buried himself deep in her body. Jess paused, his body throbbing.

"Painful or almost?" he grated.

"Almost. Oh, Jess, I've never felt this way before."

"You've led a sheltered life." But she could hear his satisfaction. "I can see that." She opened her eyes as he began to move within her. "I'm glad."

He held her so tightly Elly couldn't tell which of them was exuding the fine perspiration that slicked their skin. She felt Jess's hands under her hips, lifting her, guiding her as he increased the

pace of the lovemaking. But she was unaware of the way her legs wrapped around Jess's waist as she closed her eyes again. The powerful driving rhythm was dominating her senses. She was alive with the knowledge that the man who held her so fiercely was the man she loved, and when the shimmering climax shook her, Elly could no longer avoid saying the words.

"Jess, oh, Jess, I love you, love you, love you..."

Jess lifted his head to watch her face as she surrendered to the force of their mutual passion. He realized that the words were the finishing touch. They made it all perfect. She was his in a way no other woman had ever been. *She loved him.*

Then he couldn't think at all as his own satisfaction washed over him. The release seemed endless, but finally he sprawled heavily on Elly's softness. For a long moment he lay still, luxuriating in the feel of her and then, reluctantly, he rolled to one side. When he gathered her against him, she opened her eyes and met his gaze. He stared down at her, drinking in the sight of her tawny-gold eyes. Then he smiled slightly.

"Why did you wait, Jess?" Elly's eyes were serious.

"You mean why was I such a gentleman for two months?"

"Yes."

"It was because I wanted to be sure of you in other ways first. You're sweet and sensible and intelligent. I wanted you to see that we were right for each other. I didn't want to use sex to push you into anything you didn't really want." It sounded reasonable to his

own ears. "But I should have guessed how deeply you felt. Then I wouldn't have waited two months to make love to you."

"Now you know how I feel," she said. "I'd like to know how you feel, Jess." Elly studied him intently.

"Damned good." He stretched and yawned.

"That's not what I meant. I want to know if you love me," she whispered starkly.

Jess experienced the first flicker of uneasiness. "Elly, honey, I'm going to marry you. I'll take care of you. I think you trust me, and we want each other. Isn't that enough?"

"I want you to tell me that you love me, Jess," she said with stubborn pride. "That you're giving yourself to me as completely as I'm prepared to give myself to you."

"Why?"

"Why!" She freed herself to sit up against the pillows. "Because that's the way this whole thing is supposed to work. I love you. I'd like some assurance that you love me."

He eyed her for a long moment. "Last weekend you said you wanted the assurance that I could feel genuine passion for you. I've given you that assurance and now you want more. How much more, Elly?"

She flinched. "That's not fair, Jess. I'm only asking that the man who claims he wants to marry me also tells me he loves me. But you're not going to do that, are you?" She edged toward the side of the bed, her eyes blazing. "You're afraid to let yourself love me, aren't you?" she challenged. "After that disaster with Marina Car-

rington, you're not about to risk loving another woman."

"You don't know what the hell you're talking about! I felt a lot of things for Marina, but not love." Jess exploded off the bed, catching Elly by the wrist because she would have darted toward the bathroom. "Now calm down or so help me I'll..."

"You'll what? Beat me?" She glared at him.

Jess's mouth curved slightly. "No, honey. I'll take you back to bed and make love to you again. This time I'll try to do the job right so you won't come out of it spitting like a scalded cat."

She was beyond caution now. "The only right way to make love to me, Jess Winter, is to *be* in love with me."

"Damn you, Elly!" Unexpectedly Jess lost his own temper. Clamping her around the waist, he lifted her so that she was eye to eye with him. She braced herself with her palms on his shoulders. Her gaze was gold with the fire of her feelings. "You little witch, I'll teach you to provoke me. I'm going to lay you back and make love to you until you admit I not only give you what you need in bed, but that you won't ever want it from anyone else!"

Elly heard and paled at the words. *Witch*. She was not another Marina, but the fear that she had acted so as to remind him of her swept through Elly. She threw her arms around his neck, pleading with him silently to forget the outburst.

"I hear you, Jess. You don't have to prove it." She smiled. "But if you're intent on it, I won't argue."

"Elly?"

"I love you, Jess."

"I know, honey, I know." He set her gently on the bed and gathered her closely. "I'll take care of you and your love, Elly Trent. I swear it."

He didn't call her a witch again. As she lay in bed a long while later, Elly reminded herself that Jess hadn't called Marina's name while he was making love. If she still haunted him, at least he hadn't been haunted tonight. She snuggled down into the comforting heat of his body and closed her eyes. Elly told herself that there was no way Jess could have made love so passionately if he'd been thinking of another woman.

*

JUST AS IT HAD the last time Jess spent the night, the phone rang early the next morning. Elly blinked herself awake.

"Damn," he said. "I'll get it." He paced toward the door, not bothering to collect any clothes en route.

Elly watched him leave, bemused by the novelty of waking up with a man in her bed. She could hear his voice faintly as he responded to the caller, but she was content to stretch grandly and take her time about heading for a shower, until she heard the name *Trentco*. Hastily she scrambled out of bed, grabbed her robe and started for the stairs. Jess was speaking crisply, with more than a faint trace of aloof arrogance.

"That won't be necessary, Mrs. Gaines. I've got all the resources I need at my disposal. Advising people in situations such as this is my business and I'm good at it." There was a pause

while Clara Gaines apparently tried to argue.

"Jess!" Elly stood clutching her robe. "Jess, get off the phone. Let me talk to her. This isn't your concern."

But Jess ignored her. "I wouldn't worry too much about her offbeat lifestyle, Mrs. Gaines. It doesn't impact her ability to vote her shares in Trentco. I'll look forward to meeting you next Monday at the stockholders' meeting. I'll be attending as Elly's adviser. Should be interesting. Goodbye, Mrs. Gaines." He hung up.

"Jess, you shouldn't have interfered," Elly said. "What was all that nonsense about your being my consultant? This is very messy family business and I don't think you should just, well, invite yourself into it."

"I realize it involves your family, Elly," he said placatingly, "but it also involves you, and business finance. I'm an expert on both. That gives me the right to act as your consultant."

"Expert! You're not an expert on me, for heaven's sake! Stay out of this, Jess. If I want your advice, I'll ask for it."

He studied her for a long moment, taking in the militant gleam in her eyes.

"Elly, don't be ridiculous. Why should you walk into that meeting alone on Monday? It's going to be you against the rest of them. Why face it all by yourself when you've got me?"

"It won't be just me. Harrigan's on my side," she reminded him huffily.

"Oh, yes, Harrigan. The CEO. That reminds me, I want to give him a call this afternoon." There was another task waiting for Jess. He had to call the

very exclusive, very reliable firm of investigators he had hired on Monday.

ELLY MADE ONE last, weak attempt to avoid the inevitable that night when Jess called to tell her the results of his conversation with Matt Harrigan.

"You were right about him, Elly. He's going to use Trentco as a basis for building his reputation as the kind of executive who can rescue struggling firms. That's a good incentive. He's happy to work on a bonus plan, which means he won't make big money unless he's successful. Seems to have a solid knowledge of Trentco's problems and assets, and he isn't intimidated by Aunt Clara and the crowd. Which reminds me. I invited them all to dinner Saturday evening."

Elly jerked upright. "You did what? Jess, that's the last thing I feel like doing! What's the point?"

"I decided it would be a courtesy to gather them together and explain why you were going to vote not to sell. I'll lay out the facts and figures for them."

"Harrigan and I have already done that."

"That's the whole point," Jess said patiently. "Coming from me, it will make more of an impression."

THE RING of stubborn, hostile Trent faces waiting downstairs in the lobby of the San Francisco hotel was enough to make Elly feel even grimmer than she already did. Challengingly she made introductions.

Aunt Clara stepped forward first, to examine Jess with a critical eye.

"I do hope you will listen to reason, Mr. Winter, since Elly obviously will not."

"I always listen to reason." Jess dispensed his most charming smile. "Especially when it's all in the family."

To Elly's surprise, Aunt Clara blinked under the impact of the smile and then stepped back to introduce her husband and the others.

"How did you get involved in all this?" Frank Gaines asked Jess as they were seated in the hotel's dining room.

"Isn't it obvious? I'm about to become part of the family. Elly asked for some advice."

Elly's eyes widened at the blatant lie, but Aunt Clara was already pouncing. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Elly and I will be married next month." Jess opened his menu while everyone else absorbed the news.

Elly's cousin Cathy turned to her in amazement. "You're marrying him? I thought you were dating bearded dropouts."

"The wedding," Elly said, "hasn't been scheduled yet."

Jess glanced up from the menu. "The wedding," he said just as firmly, "is very much on schedule."

As the dessert arrived there was a gathering sense of agreement around the table. Jess's assurance and obvious expertise were proving persuasive. He was extraordinarily patient. But he had an instinct for using the right approach on each individual.

By the time everyone rose to leave, Elly was mesmerized by his skill. Monday's vote had become a mere formality. The family was now in

agreement. Aunt Clara paused in the lobby to pat Elly's hand.

"You're a lucky young woman, my dear. You've always had such a streak of independence in you that we couldn't help but worry on occasion. Now I think you're in good hands. Good night, Elly." She beamed at Jess. "See you both on Monday."

A LONG TIME later Jess quietly contemplated the hotel room ceiling. He was cradling Elly in one arm. She seemed to be asleep and that pleased him somehow. She looked so trusting, so right. When she was lying like this, limp and still damp from his lovemaking, he felt so much more certain of her.

Lately it seemed as if Elly was both his opponent and the prize of victory. For the past two months everything had been proceeding on schedule. Until Carrington had pulled that Peeping Tom stunt. Damn the man. He had always been a source of malicious mischief. He had come near Elly. Any closer and, as far as Jess was concerned, the man had written his own sentence. No one would really miss Damon Carrington.

*

ON TUESDAY evening Elly wandered through her house watering plants. Jess had phoned a few minutes earlier to make certain she had arrived home safely. He had sounded satisfied with himself, and she knew he thought he had everything, including her, under control.

"We're back on schedule," she told the African violets. "Trentco has been saved for the next generation, and some semblance of family ties has been restored. Leave it to an expert to get things back in order. I suppose I should be grateful he's not charging his usual fees."

She could hardly complain about the way Jess had handled the family situation, Elly told herself. He'd convinced everyone, including Aunt Clara, that he knew what he was doing, and they had all obediently voted not to sell Trentco. Matt Harrigan was delighted and promised increased profits. Order had been brought out of chaos, with Jess not even slightly ruffled by the effort it took to deal with the family. Apparently after dealing with the Carringtons, the Trents seemed quite tame to him. She had worried for no good reason.

Elly wandered into the living room and stood glaring at her ivy plants. She'd done a lot of worrying lately, and it was all connected to Jess. She'd accused him of being afraid to love, but she was the one who had been afraid of pushing him, afraid of provoking a violent confrontation between Jess and Damon Carrington, afraid that her own family troubles might remind him of the Carringtons.

Good grief, Elly thought. She had let her love of Jess make her a nervous wreck.

Elly continued through the house with the watering can. When she arrived back in the living room she was deep in thought. Absently, she gazed at herself in the mirror. She was formulating a lecture to administer to herself

when another face materialized in the mirror. Through the open drapes of the window behind her, a woman was watching her—a stunningly beautiful woman with long blond hair.

Shock held Elly immobilized after the face had disappeared. If that was whom Jess had seen the night she had tried to seduce him, it was no wonder he had muttered his ex-wife's name. Elly stood staring at the window. Damon in a wig? A woman made up to resemble Marina? And *why*? Whoever it was had been laughing at her.

That fact finally gave Elly the impetus to cross the room and yank open the front door.

She found herself staring into Damon Carrington's amused face. He was standing on her front porch, holding a small, snub-nosed gun. His cold smile looked exactly like that of the woman in the window.

"Hello, Elly. I was just about to knock. Something shake you up? You look nervous."

Instinctively, Elly flung herself backward into the safety of the house, intending to slam the door. But Damon already had his foot over the threshold.

"Sorry, I'm afraid I can't let you run and hide. I need you tonight, Elly love. I've got plans for you. Keep in mind that I will use the gun if necessary."

Elly's eyes jerked from the gun to Damon's face. Her voice felt raspy. "That was you at the window?"

"No. It was me." Blond hair cascading around her shoulders, Marina Carrington walked through Elly's front door.

There was no mistaking her. She was a feminized version of Damon, wearing a black silk shirt and black slacks as a striking foil for the silvery blond hair. Boots of obviously expensive leather completed the outfit.

"Jess thinks you're dead," Elly said flatly, deciding she must keep talking.

"So does the insurance company," Damon said pleasantly. "We've been doing quite well on the income for the past three years. But now the money is running out."

Elly caught her breath. "Well, if you're thinking of tapping my bank account, you're out of your mind. What I have saved wouldn't begin to keep you two in the style to which I'm sure you've been accustomed!"

Damon grinned. "We're not after your money, Elly."

Marina's grin mimicked her brother's and her eyes gleamed like a cat's. "How much do you think Jess would pay to get you back safe and sound, Elly Trent?"

Elly managed to keep her voice steady. "I don't see Jess paying ransom money."

"Then you don't know him very well," Marina told her. "The man's got a streak of responsibility in him a yard wide."

Elly swallowed, aware that Marina was right. But how would he react when he realized Marina was still alive?

"I can see why the two of you weren't compatible," Elly murmured. "You obviously don't suffer from an excess of integrity."

"The man proved to be a little dull in some ways," Marina threw herself down into an armchair. "I wouldn't

have expected him to settle for someone like you, however."

"Maybe you don't know him as well as you think."

Marina shook her head. "You may be right. There were times when I wondered what made him tick. And I can usually read a man's mind. Just as my brother always seems to know what a woman is thinking."

Elly swung her gaze to Damon. "Did you guess what I was thinking the other night when you sabotaged my car and then came to 'rescue' me?" Elly dared.

Carrington's eyes slitted. "How did you know I was there?"

"I watched you from the bushes."

Damon's brows rose. "Smarter than the average female. Well, at least I had the pleasure of throwing a scare into Winter."

"Did you do it just for spite?"

"Yeah. Seemed like fun. It would have been a convenient way of nabbing you. But no harm done."

"Are you ready to make the call?" Marina asked.

"Almost. This has to be properly timed. Tides, you know."

Elly's mouth went dry. "Tides? What about them?"

"You, my dear, are going to spend the night in a cozy little cabin," said Marina. "But tomorrow night will be much more scenic. You'll be able to watch the sunrise from a really choice vantage point. Go ahead and dial," she told Damon.

Elly stood frozen in front of the gun, watching him.

"We're all in luck," Damon said, as Jess came on the line. "You're spend-

ing the evening at home. Elly will be delighted." There was a pause as Jess said something in response. "Of course she's here. I'm calling from her living room. Want to talk to her?"

Elly took the receiver with shaking fingers. "Jess?"

"Damn it, Elly, what the hell's going on?"

"The gruesome twosome has arrived on my doorstep," she managed to say.

"Twosome?"

"Marina's not dead, Jess."

"That fits," he responded.

"With what?"

"Nothing, I'll explain later. Get rid of them, Elly."

"Unfortunately, it won't be that simple. Damon has a gun, Jess. He's talking ransom."

"Put him on the line."

Mutely, Elly handed the receiver to Damon. "As you can hear, she's in good health, Winter. And if you follow orders, she'll stay that way. Marina and I aren't overly greedy. I'd say sweet little Elly is worth about fifty thousand, wouldn't you?" He paused, listening. "No, I realize you can't lay your hands on that kind of money tonight. But you can get it first thing in the morning, can't you? We'll expect the cash to be packed in a briefcase. You will drive here to Elly's house and wait for a phone call tomorrow evening. We will arrange the exchange at that time. And come alone. We're bound to notice if you bring the cops along. And if you do, Elly's going to disappear for good."

"I think," said Marina, "that we'd better be on our way. Get a coat, Elly."

You'll be spending the next twenty-four hours with us at a deserted vacation cabin several miles from here."

"You don't have any heat at this cabin?" Elly asked as she walked toward the hall closet. En route she had to pass the cluster of ivy plants where she had left the paring knife she had been using to trim dead leaves—the one Jess had sharpened.

"Oh, the cabin is warm enough. But tomorrow night you'll be in a fairly uncomfortable situation, I'm afraid," Marina said smoothly. She watched Elly pull out a bulky down parka. "That should do the trick. Come on now, let's get going. Winter knows we called from your home. We don't want him mobilizing the local cops."

Elly stood clutching the parka. "But I don't understand," she began as she struggled into the jacket. She made a production out of it, but her nervousness was quite real. "What will you do when you have the money? Jess won't let the matter rest..." She deliberately swung her arm wide as if having a problem with the parka sleeve.

The edge of the garment trailed along the row of plant containers, knocking two of them down. With a haste that seemed automatic, she grabbed at the pots, for an instant her back toward Damon and Marina. The sharp little knife disappeared up her sleeve as the pots hit the floor.

"You clumsy fool!" Marina snapped.

Elly shoved her hands into her jacket pockets and waited. Inside the right pocket she released the small knife.

"You'd better tie her wrists now, Marina." Damon tossed a length of

cord to his sister. "We wouldn't want her getting any clumsier."

IN PORTLAND, Jess very carefully placed the receiver into its cradle. What he really wanted to do was hurl the damned instrument against the wall. His fingers were almost shaking with the effort it took to control himself.

The Carringtons had dared to touch Elly.

Jess glanced at the neatly typed reports he had been studying when the phone had rung a few minutes earlier.

The papers carried the letterhead of the very expensive agency he had hired. It was convinced that Marina Carrington had not died in the yachting accident, and that she and her brother were living very nicely on the coast of Mexico.

They should have had the sense to stay there, Jess decided as he got to his feet. But Damon and Marina saw no need to play by anyone else's rules.

Jess walked into the bedroom and found his briefcase. He would do whatever necessary to see Elly safe. To Damon and Marina, she probably appeared to be a weak point through which they could reach Jess. But she had also become a source of strength to him.

There was nothing to do now but wait.

ELLY WAS uncomfortable, stiff and disgusted. Fear had given way to other emotions as time passed. She had expected to be tossed into a closet or a bedroom and left by herself. Then she could have begun work with the paring knife. Instead she was seated on a

couch in the main room of the cabin in full sight of the Carringtons. Even asking to use the bathroom facilities had not helped. Marina had accompanied her, bringing the gun along.

When Damon and Marina decided to take turns staying awake during the night, Elly tried getting some sleep.

She awoke a long time later, vaguely aware of the low murmur of the twins' voices as they sat talking near the fire. But it was much later that day that she finally realized what was in store for her. The short twilight was falling across the ocean when the Carringtons got her into the Porsche.

"I'm going to hate leaving this baby behind." Damon frowned as he turned the vehicle down a back road that led close to the beach.

"We'll get a new one on credit. We can make the fifty thousand look like five hundred thousand to a potential creditor. Look how long we made that insurance money last," Marina reminded him. She was holding the gun now.

Elly looked away. Her mind was filled now with Damon's route to the sea. It would be totally dark soon, but she knew they were nearing the cove that was less than a mile from her home—the one that contained the castle rock. Elly had heard them say something earlier about leaving her on the rock. Then she frantically tried to recall the tide schedule, a new fear building in her.

"This should be it." Damon parked the Porsche at the edge of the bluff. "Let's get moving."

"It's getting dark," Marina said. "No one can see us."

"Still, I don't like it." He pulled Elly out of the car so abruptly that she fell. "Get up, bitch." He glanced at his twin. "Give me the rest of that rope. I'll take care of this." He yanked Elly across the wet sand, pushing her toward the castle rock. "I hear you don't like swimming in the sea, Elly. Soon that's the only way you'll be able to get off that rock. That's assuming you found some way to untie yourself first. Besides, I got a good look at this place the other day. When the tide is in, even a good swimmer would have trouble with those waves. Even after we tell him where you are, Winter probably won't be able to get you off until morning."

Elly flinched as she stared straight ahead. The sea was already beginning to foam around the base of the rock. She wanted to plead with her captor but knew it would be useless. He would only derive more pleasure out of what he was doing to her. Grimly, Elly tried to push her imagination to the furthest corners of her mind while she finished the awkward scramble up the rock. In a few more minutes she wouldn't be able to see much at all, and then what would she do when the small creatures skittered and darted in and around the rocky pile they called home?

Ten minutes later Elly sat alone, imprisoned queen of the castle, and watched the lights of the Porsche disappear. Below her the sea began to surge more and more impatiently around the base of the fortress.

Now Elly could understand why the Carringtons' brand of excitement had begun to pall on Jess.

IT WAS WHEN she began fumbling for the paring knife that Elly realized there were aspects of her situation that didn't fit the movie stereotype. It was damned hard to work her bound hands around to her side pocket—especially when the sound of the sea kept distracting her.

She was sitting on a reasonably level surface of the rock, and would have been visible from the bluff above the beach. If it had been daylight.

Something moved around her toes, probably a small crab. Elly jerked her bound feet away and felt her ankle scrape across a rough-edged shell. It was impossible in the dim light to tell if she had cut herself, but Elly was afraid she had. The thought panicked her. Would blood draw more of the rock's denizens?

She mustn't think about that. She had to focus every ounce of concentration on getting free. Soon the rendezvous between Damon and Jess would take place, and she was damned if she would let the Carringtons get away with using her to get at Jess.

The paring knife came into her fingers at last. Cautiously she grasped the handle and tried to angle the blade toward the cords. She made contact easily enough, but seemed to be sawing away uselessly. With a growing sense of desperation, she continued working away and finally something began to give.

The process took far longer than she would have expected. By the time Elly's wrists were freed and she started in on the ankle ties, she was chilled and tired. Her jeans were damp from the spray of the incoming waves. The knowledge that the spray was already

leaping as high as her perch told Elly just how deep the water around her was becoming. Frantically, she renewed her efforts and cried out in rage when the frail knife finally snapped.

"Damn it to hell!" Tossing aside the useless handle, Elly leaned down to wrench at the remaining cords. Perhaps they were nearly severed, or perhaps her fear and anger made her stronger than she knew. She was free a few moments later.

The only way down from the top of the rock was the way she had climbed it. It was either that or cower up here until Jess finally found her.

The hardest part came when her feet slipped into the foaming surface of the water. She was startled at the strength of the surging tide.

"Well, at least it's headed in the right direction," she told herself aloud. "I won't be carried out to sea. I'll be washed ashore."

Being battered about on the rocks didn't sound like much of an alternative, however. Elly clung to the wall of the castle and tried to remember exactly what the terrain around her looked like when it wasn't inundated. Then she unzipped her jacket. She should try to keep it as dry as possible. She was going to need it when she got to shore, chilled to the bone from the cold sea. She tied it awkwardly around her throat.

She found the bottom with jolting force when a playful wave ripped her free of the rock and tossed her toward shore. Elly floundered, trying to right herself, and staggered violently when her foot touched bottom. The water was up to her waist.

The struggle to the beach seemed to last forever, and it drained so much energy that by the time she reached the damp sand Elly could hardly stand. She had never been so cold. The sudden fear of hypothermia made her untie the damp jacket and she shrugged into it. It provided the warmth the core of her body needed. Knowing there was no longer any time to waste, Elly turned in the direction of her home. She would take time later to congratulate herself on the battle with the sea.

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THE HOUSE was deserted when she reached it. If Jess had come there to wait for the phone call, he had already received it and left. The front door was unlocked. He must have left in a hurry.

Hastily, Elly stripped off her jeans and wet clothing, dashing up the stairs as she did so. Grabbing for dry clothes in her closet, she put them on with the same fumbling haste. Then she was racing back down the stairs for the car keys and was out the door in seconds.

Halfway to the beach cabin, Elly began to wonder if she shouldn't have called the local authorities. Well, it was too late now. She pushed the accelerator closer to the floor. She would have to leave the car some distance from the cottage, so she decided to place it squarely across the road that Damon would take when he and Marina left.

Parking the car, Elly started toward the cabin. With any luck the distant rumble of the sea would hide any noise she might make. When she rounded a corner and saw the tail of the Porsche, she remembered that Marina was supposed to be waiting in the car. Chang-

ing her direction, she slipped into the trees and stayed out of sight. But she thought she saw Marina's blond head on the driver's side. Elly went on toward the cabin.

The white Jaguar was sitting in the driveway. Elly halted again, uncertain of what to do next. There were lights on inside the cabin and she approached from one side. At the window she looked into the main room.

Jess was standing there, the briefcase at his feet. He looked deceptively casual. It was Damon who looked nervous. He was holding the gun very tightly, and his evident tension told Elly all she needed to know.

Damon had gotten himself in fairly deep this time, and he seemed to be realizing it. So did Jess. Elly couldn't hear his muffled voice through the window, but Damon's words were loud and sharp—further evidence of his unstable emotional state.

"Don't you dare threaten me, Winter. Not if you want to see your precious little country girl again. Just shut your damn mouth and open that briefcase. I want to see the money."

Jess said something quietly in response, then went down slowly on one knee to open the briefcase.

Elly yelled through the window. "Hey, Carrington! If you think we're going to let you have that money, you're..."

Damon whirled to face the window. Elly had meant to get his attention, but she was startled to see him raise the gun with deadly purpose. Elly threw herself onto the ground.

The gun roared and the window shattered as the bullet tore through it.

Elly stayed down; but there was no second shot. She heard Damon's violent yell and then the sound of crashing furniture.

"Elly!" Jess was leaning out the window, an expression of savage concern on his face.

"I'm all right, Jess."

But he had turned back into the room before she could move.

Elly leaped to her feet and stared in at the scene. Clearly Jess had jumped Carrington and the impact of his lunge had sent him crashing against the wall, stunning him. Now the two men were sprawling across the floor in a short, violent battle that was ending almost as soon as it began. Damon didn't stand a chance.

The gun had been sent flying in the first assault and Jess's sheer fury had taken care of the rest. Now he pinned Damon to the floor and started to hammer at his beautifully chiseled face.

Damon's cries of pain became mere grunts and then faded. Elly realized he was almost unconscious from the punishment. She dashed into the room.

"Jess! Jess, that's enough, you'll kill him!"

"I should kill him."

"He's not worth it. Let the law have him. Besides, we've got Marina to worry about."

"Marina! Damn, I almost forgot about her." Jess staggered to his feet. "Where is she?"

"In the Porsche outside." But even as Elly spoke, the roar of its engine split the night.

"She's leaving! Damn that witch. I swear to God, this time I'm going to put these two away for ten years."

"Damon probably told her to get out if she heard gunfire and he didn't immediately appear. But she's not going far. I parked my car across the road."

"You're just full of surprises tonight, aren't you? Come on, help me with handsome over there."

"What are you going to do?"

"Use him to stop Marina."

Jess ignored the small handgun on the floor and opened his briefcase to withdraw a wicked-looking weapon of his own. Elly stared at it.

"What on earth? I thought you had money in there!"

"I do. I also had this." He reached down to haul Damon upright. Carington was so groggy he didn't seem to realize what was happening. When forced to move toward the door, he groaned but didn't argue. Elly drew his arm around her shoulder to steady him while Jess kept him on his feet.

In the darkness, the Porsche headlights cut a swath through the night as the car swung violently around. Marina had just realized the exit was blocked and was starting back toward the cabin. As she gunned the engine, Jess pushed Damon out into the middle of her path. He staggered and fell to the ground.

Simultaneously the Porsche's tires screamed as Marina braked savagely. Then the car door opened.

"Damon!" Marina ran toward her brother.

"Stay right where you are, Marina, or I'll put a bullet in him. Maybe one

in you, too, I'm getting so sick of Caringtons." Jess stepped out of the trees. The lights of the car fell harshly on the gun in his hand.

"You hurt him! You hurt Damon!"

"He hurt Elly," Jess responded. "He's lucky I didn't kill him. Believe me, the temptation to finish this right here is overwhelming. Don't tempt me, Marina."

"You can't prove anything, Jess," she said in a last-ditch effort. "It'll be your word against ours."

"If I have trouble making the kidnapping charges stick, we'll see how well the insurance company does with the fraud. On your feet, Marina. We've got a lot to do."

Something moved on Marina's face as she stared at him. Her voice softened. "Jess...please. Listen to me. For the sake of what we once..."

"Forget it, Marina. That act hasn't worked in a long time. You wore it out. That's your whole problem, as well as Damon's. You were born thinking you could get away with anything forever. But this time you had the stupidity to threaten something I want very badly. Stupidity is the one crime you always have to pay for in this world."

"Bastard," Marina hissed.

Jess smiled faintly. "Now you've got it, Marina."

IT WAS MUCH later that evening when a subdued, watchful Elly sat sipping the brandy Jess had just poured. She had spoken very little to him during the past two hours. In truth there hadn't been much opportunity. The local law authorities had no difficulty with Jess's side of the tale. After all, Deputy

Charlie Atkins knew Jess and Elly. In a small town the burden of proof tended to be on the outsiders.

Besides, as Charlie explained to his superior, there were those Porsche tracks on the bluff above the cove, all that money in a briefcase and Elly Trent's wet clothes. Everybody knew she wouldn't go swimming voluntarily. Nobody in his right mind went swimming in a cold sea at night anyway. And everyone in town knew Jess and Elly. Good people. They wouldn't make up a thing like this. Charlie's boss concurred.

Elly turned over in her mind the scene in the sheriff's office. Jess hadn't settled down yet. There was a tension in him that wasn't dissolving, even though the Carringtons were safely in custody. He began pacing the room in front of her. Elly curled her legs beneath her as she sat on the sofa. Her wariness increased.

"How did you know about the insurance fraud?" she finally asked.

Jess took a sip of his brandy. "I had a firm working on it. After Damon showed up here I decided to do a little checking. I knew he was up to something, and it made me wonder how he'd been surviving on his own for the past three years. And if he really felt I'd been responsible for Marina's death, why hadn't he come looking for revenge before now? I kept the inquiries going." Jess shrugged. "The investigators turned up fairly convincing evidence that Marina was still alive."

"I see."

"By the way," he went on, "the deputy said he heard that Carrington put in an appearance at that potluck

you went to last week. You never mentioned seeing him."

"I didn't see any point in saying anything. I would only have upset you and besides, I—"

"Upset me! Elly, if I'd known he was still in the neighborhood I could have protected you better. You should have told me he was still in town." His dark brows formed a solid line above his gray eyes. "I know the present situation is resolved, but it's time I stepped up the schedule. We've wasted enough time. There's no reason we can't be married next week. I can wind up my last consulting job by Friday and move in here on Saturday. Once I'm finally living here I won't have to worry about you."

"Now hold on just a minute, Jess," she said.

He ignored her. "I can contact a moving company tomorrow. We can also apply for the license this week. I'll arrange for the ceremony on Monday."

"Damn it, Jess, just slow down!" Elly leaped to her feet, her eyes blazing. "This is my life we're discussing, not just yours, and I've got a couple of things to say about it."

"Elly, you've been through a lot tonight. You're probably feeling tired and you're still under a strain."

"I'm not in a mood to be soothed or consoled or patted on the head and sent to bed. Sit down, Jess." Warily, he sank onto the couch and took another sip of brandy. She stood facing him. "Now, let's get specific about these plans of yours."

"I'm listening."

"I accused you of being afraid to let yourself love me. But I had it all backward, Jess. I'm the one who's running scared. I've been nervous and wary and . . . cautious around you since day one. And I've become increasingly nervous about the fact that you can't seem to admit you love me. That, Jess, is the last straw."

Jess suddenly went still. "What are you saying, Elly?"

"That I'm through running scared—through being wary, through walking on eggs around you when it comes to sticky issues. I'm giving you an ultimatum. We're not getting married until you find the guts to admit you love me. And you're going to have to make me believe it."

"I know."

Elly stared at him. Jess's mouth crooked slightly as he glanced down into his brandy and then back up to meet her eyes.

"You do?" she managed weakly. "How long have you . . . I mean . . ."

"I think I've known since the beginning," Jess said. "You were so very right in every way. Before I realized what I was doing I was fitting you into all my plans. But I didn't want to spell it all out to myself. You were right. I was running scared."

"Oh, Jess, I didn't mean that."

"Sure you did, it's the truth. I've spent too many years learning to be in control, Elly. I wanted to be in control of myself and of everything around me. I've always been inclined that way, but after that fiasco of a marriage, I really decided to stay in command of myself and others. I had made a total

fool of myself. That's a hard thing for a man to live down, Elly."

Elly was consumed with remorse for having pushed him into the confession. She knelt in front of him, catching one of his big hands between hers, and looked up at him earnestly. "I know, Jess. I thought that was the problem. I should never have provoked you into admitting it. Forget I said anything, okay?"

He looked amused. "It's too late. You've already said it. And so have I."

"Well, we'll just pretend that you haven't."

"The hell we will." His eyes were warming with a sensual laughter. He set down his glass and moved his free hand to her braided hair. "One of the things you're going to have to learn, Elly, is that if you push a man to the wall, you have to take the consequences."

"What consequences?"

"You said I was not only going to have to admit I loved you, but make you believe I meant it."

"I believe you, Jess. I love you so much I just knew you loved me, too. Or that you'd love me if you just gave yourself a chance. For one thing I trust you, and that means more than I can ever say. You're an honorable man and you're generous. You even tolerated my obnoxious relatives. You've given me a lot."

"But it wasn't quite enough to make you agree to marry me." Slowly, Jess began to work on a hairpin.

"I guess I'm a greedy woman," Elly admitted.

"Mmm." He removed the next pin.

"I'm glad. Because I've decided I like

admitting that I love you. It's a great relief, you see. I no longer have to worry about maintaining my control when it comes to you. I began realizing that after the first time I took you to bed. Everything felt good afterward. It felt right. Now I know I can just relax and surrender to the inevitable. I don't have to worry about the end results. You taught me not to fear them, sweetheart. I owe you for that. And I intend to spend the rest of my life thanking you."

She turned her lips into his warm palm. "I'll treasure your love, Jess. I'll protect it and keep it safe."

"I know. I trust you, Elly. I've never really trusted a woman before in my life. But I trust you."

He scooped her up in his arms. "While we're on the subject of trust," he began as he strode toward the stairs, "this is probably a good time to mention that I don't particularly want to be protected from certain facts in the future. I want you to trust me completely, Elly."

Elly lifted her head. "Do I hear a lecture coming on? I hope you're not going to lecture me every time you carry me off to bed. It could spoil the mood, you know. Might give me a headache." She let her fingers slide persuasively up to the nape of his neck.

"I have an excellent home remedy for headaches." In her room, he stood her on her feet and removed her burnt-orange sweater. His eyes shadowed with desire as he touched the tips of her breasts. "Guaranteed not to fail."

She felt herself growing warm with the beginnings of sensual tension at his husky tone. "Unfortunately, I don't

have a headache, so we can't experiment."

"Then we'll go straight to bed. I'll do the lecture later." He undressed her with an urgency that told its own story.

Elly fumbled with his shirt, and then she unfastened his jeans. As the last garment fell away, he pushed himself into her hands, letting her know the full weight and readiness of his need.

"Elly, my sweet, exciting Elly." He picked her up again and settled her on the bed. "Do you know what I regret most about the last couple of months?"

"What's that?" She reached for him as he came down beside her.

"I regret my own stupidity in waiting so long to take you to bed. When I think of all the nights together we missed..." His words broke off as he leaned down to kiss the swell of her breast.

Elly pulled him close, pushing her leg tantalizingly between his thighs. His low groan of arousal was her immediate reward. When she let her fingertips trail down his chest to the excitingly rough hair below his flat stomach, he groaned again.

Jess reached out and felt the shape of her hip, letting his fingers sink into her soft, resilient skin. "I warned you that if you were going to push a man, you'd have to learn to take the consequences." He rolled over on top of her, pinning her beneath him. The brief humor faded as he felt her wrap herself around him. Gray eyes gleamed in the shadows, and the lines of his harsh face became etched with his hunger.

"I love you, Jess."

"I know," he whispered. "I've never known what it was like to be loved until I met you. I could never let you go now. Do you realize that? I love you so much, Elly."

He moved then, joining his body to hers in a rush of passion that brought

with it a sense of forever. Elly didn't question the feeling. She clung to it and to the man who created it. Jess was giving himself completely, just as she had given herself to him.






ANNE STUART

Catspaw



All the high-society women in San Francisco
found Patrick Blackheart irresistible. But
Ferris Byrd—with all her secrets of the past
and plans for the future—could hardly afford
to fall under his spell....



Ferris Byrd didn't want to be in the San Francisco town house that held Blackheart, Inc. Phillip had talked her into it, the Committee for Saving the Bay had insisted and here she was. She had no choice but to carry through.

"May I help you?" The polite greeting had been uttered in a surprisingly hostile tone, and the receptionist, whose desk plate identified her as Kate Christiansen, sniffed disapprovingly.

Ferris had little doubt what the woman would see through her flinty blue eyes. She'd see a woman of elegance, her custom-made leather shoes worth more than Kate Christiansen's entire wardrobe. Ferris looked rich, understated and well cared for, from generations of such pampered elegance. And only she knew how hard that look was to come by.

"I'm Ferris Byrd," she said, her pleasant, well-modulated voice another triumph. "I have an appointment to see Mr. Blackheart."

Kate Christiansen did not look pleased, and Ferris wondered whether it was jealousy that caused that glower, or something else.

"He'll be with you shortly. You can go on in."

Ferris settled in a low-slung chair by John Patrick Blackheart's empty desk, her long, slender legs stretched out in front of her.

"Ferris Byrd?" The smooth, friendly voice made her jump, and the body that went with it was just as much of a shock. He was an immensely tall, almost ridiculously handsome man. "I'm Trace Walker, Patrick's associate. How can I help you?"

Ferris immediately decided that the toothy smile was charming, the steely-blue gaze warm and friendly. With luck maybe she could deal with this affable giant. "I represent the Committee for Saving the Bay."

He smiled that dazzling smile of his. "I talked with Senator Merriam yesterday—he said it has to do with the Puffin Ball?"

Ferris controlled the spurt of irritation that sped through her. Phillip's hands-on approach aided him immeasurably in his political career, but it irritated the hell out of his administrative assistant and brand-new fiancée. "Exactly. We've added a new touch this year. The Von Emmerling emeralds, to be exact. We're raffling off the chance to wear them at the Puffin Ball. The first prize winner gets to wear them for two hours, second prize one hour, third prize half an hour."

"Oh, Lord," Walker groaned. "And you want us to protect them? The most famous emeralds in the world, and you're going to be handing them out in a crowded ballroom?"

Ferris smiled. "Crazy, isn't it? But people seem to be going wild about it."

"You realize this is going to be practically impossible."

"I imagine it will be difficult," Ferris allowed. "But as long as Carleton House is secure and someone's on the scene, I expect it will be all right."

"Carleton House!" Walker groaned. "That rambling old mansion will take weeks to burglar-proof."

Ferris smiled sweetly. "The Puffin Ball is next Friday. Of course, if you don't think you can handle it..." It would certainly make things easier for her, dealing with the firm that handled the regular security for Carleton House.

"Don't browbeat him, Miss Byrd." Another voice entered the fray. The man walking toward her with that amused expression on his face could only be the heretofore absent John Patrick Blackheart. The most famous living cat burglar in the world.

Ferris Byrd looked as if she stepped out of *Vogue*, and yet there was something that wasn't quite right. Too pale, Blackheart thought critically. And the hair should be loose, flowing, a brown-black cloud around that arresting face of hers, not tied back in a tight bun.

But the very last thing he expected was the look of hostility in her green eyes when they turned to his. Miss Ferris Byrd did not like John Patrick Blackheart. And Blackheart found himself intrigued.

"Patrick!" Trace greeted him exuberantly, with only the faintest expression of guilt. "I thought I could get started... that is, Miss Byrd was here and I..."

"Don't worry about it, Trace. You know I'm always late." Blackheart turned to Ferris, and for the first time she felt the full force of his tawny brown eyes. "Senator Merriam spoke with me this morning."

"Senator Merriam's been busy," she said, unable to control her start of irritation. "Then you know the problem?"

"The Puffin Ball, the Von Emmerling emeralds, and Carleton House? Yes, I know."

"Do you think we can handle it, Patrick?" Trace asked eagerly, obviously more than happy to try.

"I'm wondering what Miss Byrd thinks," Blackheart murmured.

He must have sensed her disapproval. "I think the Carleton security staff would be just as capable," she said coolly.

"Do you? You've never heard the saying, 'It takes a thief to catch a thief?'"

"Certainly. The question is, what does the second thief do once he's caught the first one?"

Blackheart smiled. "Is that what you're afraid of? That we'll run off with the Von Emmerling emeralds ourselves?"

"Oh, no, Patrick!" Trace's protest was explosive. "She wouldn't think that we—"

"Yes, I would," Ferris said sharply.

"Yes, she would, Trace," Blackheart said sweetly. "So the question is, how do we get Miss Ferris Byrd to trust us enough to enable us to do our job properly?"

"Are you taking the job?" Ferris questioned. For a moment she'd thought she'd driven him off.

"Oh, most definitely. I never could resist a challenge," Blackheart said. And Ferris had the melancholy suspicion that he wasn't talking about the Von Emmerling emeralds. "I give you leave to disapprove of me all you want," he added magnanimously, that wicked smile lighting his eyes. "As long as it doesn't interfere with my work. I have my professional pride to consider."

Nobly Ferris swallowed the retort that rose to her lips. She could feel Blackheart's eyes on her.

"A truce, Mr. Blackheart. And you may as well call me Ferris, since we'll be working together."

"I might. But I don't like it. Do you have any other names?"

Ferris controlled the unexpectedly nervous start. "Frances," she said sullenly.

"I don't like that, either. I'll just have to make do with Miss Byrd until I find something that pleases me," he murmured.

IN THE BRIGHT, glaring light of the secret workshop hidden behind the false wall in the basement of his jewelry shop, Hans Werdegast admired his handiwork. The Von Emmerling emeralds had to be his greatest creation. Anyone without a jeweler's loupe would be fooled.

Sighing, the old man dropped the glittering almost-jewels into a plastic bag. He had to be ready to pass them to his customer later that evening.

CARLETON HOUSE was an impressive old mansion overlooking the Pacific Ocean on a point of land to the west of the magnificent Golden Gate Bridge. The multitude of elegant rooms, the expanse of gardens, the dozens of bedroom suites on the third and fourth floors made it an admirable facility for any kind of social affair. It also made it utter hell to protect.

"There you are, Ferris, dear." The blue-haired lady in the Davidow suit greeted her with a warm smile. "And you've brought Mr. Blackheart. How good of you to come, Patrick! I knew we could count on you."

Ferris had her first look at Blackheart's celebrated charm as he kissed Phillip's mother's hand. And that explained, in part, why Phillip had been so insistent on Blackheart, Inc. Regina Merriam was clearly entranced with the cat burglar.

Ferris knew an escape when she saw one. "Regina, why don't you show Mr. Blackheart around while I check on the decorations committee? You know Carleton House as well as anyone."

Regina smiled at her future daughter-in-law. "I'd adore to. Come along, Patrick, my boy, and I'll show you what an impossible job you have ahead of you. How's Trace? Will he be coming later? Olivia has been pestering me all day."

"Trace will be here." Ferris could feel those eyes of his following her as she made good her escape. "Later, Miss Byrd," he called after her, the words a warning and a challenge.

God, she was in trouble. Blackheart was far more dangerous than she'd imagined. The only thing she could do

was call Phillip and beg him to let her come back and work on his campaign to move up from the state senate to the U.S. Senate.

In the meantime, she was too busy that day to think much one way or the other about John Patrick Blackheart, apart from avoiding him whenever she saw him coming.

She couldn't get through to Phillip till late in the afternoon. But his soothing tones offered her cold comfort indeed. "It will only be a week, Ferris. Surely Blackheart can't be so bad—my mother adores him, and I trust her taste implicitly. After all, she thinks you're too good for me."

"Blackheart isn't bad, Phillip. I'm just not comfortable around him." She let her voice sound mournful and pleading, hoping she might appeal to his protective instincts.

Phillip was too smart for her. "No, Ferris. There's nothing you can't handle, and it will all be over by Friday. I'll be there to take you to the ball, and we might even consider making our formal announcement."

"I thought we were going to wait till after the primary."

"I was considering it, but I've decided you might bring me more votes," he said frankly.

That was the problem with their relationship, Ferris decided suddenly. His election always came first, for both of them, and their engagement was more a useful adjunct than an emotional commitment.

"Let's wait and see," she temporized. "Will you call later?" Her voice was brisk and efficient now.

"Sunday at three, same as always. You'll stick with it, won't you, Ferris?"

Ferris sighed. "Of course, Phillip."

"I knew I could count on you, Ferris. I love you." The last was hurried, almost by rote, and Ferris repeated it the same way.

They would deal well together. She would be the perfect politician's wife, charming, reserved, very clever, with just the right amount of public deference and private encouragement to aid Phillip in attaining whatever office he was seeking. Phillip was an ambitious man, it was an integral part of his nature, and she wouldn't have him any other way. It was ambition that had gotten her where she was now, and she wasn't going back if she could help it. She would support Phillip completely, follow him . . .

"What's that determined look on your face?"

Ferris rounded on Blackheart. "Must you sneak up on people?" she demanded indignantly.

He favored her with that charming smile that melted all women within a ten-mile radius. "I can't change years of habit overnight, Miss Byrd. Are you ready to leave?"

The last thing she wanted to do was get back into the cramped quarters of her car with him.

"I'm ready," she snapped.

It was a foggy day in late February, cool and chilly and distinctly unfriendly. She couldn't wait till she was back in her small, cozy apartment, her shoes off and her long legs curled up underneath her, a snifter of brandy in her hand. *God bless gourmet frozen*

dinners, she thought with a blissful sigh.

"What occasioned that erotic moan?" Blackheart drawled from beside her, and she jumped. For a brief, heavenly moment she had almost forgotten he was sitting beside her as she raced the car haphazardly back into the city.

Her tense shoulders began to relax a trifle. In less than five minutes she'd be free of him, in ten minutes she'd be home. A tentative smile lit her face. "I was thinking about food," she confessed. She couldn't summon more than a trace of irritation as she screeched around the corner toward his office.

"I didn't think you could smile."

"And you, Blackheart, smile too much. 'A damned, smiling villain,' Shakespeare said. He must have had you in mind."

"You think so?" He seemed genuinely pleased at the notion. "And who are you?"

"Lady Macbeth," she snapped, pulling to a stop in front of the old brick town house that housed Blackheart, Inc.

He made no move to leave the car, just looked at her out of those translucent eyes of his. "No, I don't think so," he murmured. "I haven't got it yet, but I will."

Reaching for the door handle, he pulled himself out of the Mercedes with a graceful swoop. Leaning down to close the door, he looked in at her. He grinned, a glint of wickedness in those tawny brown eyes.

She screeched the car away from the curb, directly into the traffic, and

headed for her apartment in the marina section of San Francisco. It must have been a shot in the dark. He knew she went by the name of Ferris, but she'd openly admitted her first name was Frances. And that was the truth, or mostly the truth. Her first name was a variant of Frances. And it was none of Blackheart's damned business if she chose not to use it.

*

THE ALARM RANG obscenely early. Ferris opened one eye. It was Sunday. The ball wasn't until the following Friday, and the jewels weren't due to arrive until Monday. The only duty she had to perform today, other than the onerous weekly task of mucking out the accumulated mess that was her apartment, was to run over to Carleton House and retrieve her briefcase. She'd left it behind on purpose, part of her distrust of Blackheart extending to her personal papers.

As usual, the mess took longer than she expected. It was her weekend to do the full job, even taking a broomstick under the queen-size bed to roust out the dead panty hose, week-old *Chronicles*, empty boxes of Yodels, a silk blouse she'd thought she'd lost, and three Nikes, all for the left foot.

With a sigh, she emptied a tin of Seafood Supper and set it by the open door to the terrace before getting dressed. Sooner or later Blackie would have to return. Like all good San Franciscans, he was a true gourmet.

She dressed in faded Levi's rather than the Gloria Vanderbilts Phillip admired, leaving off the discreet gold jewelry that was her mark of caste. The

apartment was clean, Phillip was out of town, and she was free, blissfully free. There'd be no bun in her hair today.

The fog had lifted somewhat by the time she pulled up in the empty circular drive in front of Carleton House. It took her twelve minutes to find the right key for the French door off the ballroom, another two minutes to rattle the rusty catch loose. And then she was inside, in her magic kingdom.

Ferris had fought the idea of using Carleton House for the Puffin Ball. Olivia Summers had been on the opposing side. Ferris had been more than irritated when Olivia had prevailed, but that irritation had changed to delight when she first wandered through the old mansion.

She could thank Olivia for Blackheart, too. It was Olivia who'd first mentioned Blackheart's name, eagerly seconded by Regina Merriam and voted by the Committee for Saving the Bay with an almost lustful enthusiasm.

Olivia had once been engaged to Phillip before breaking it off to marry Dale Summers. And Olivia had her own political aspirations, coveting Phillip's senate seat with her blue, blue eyes. She had brains, blue blood, charm, ambition and a seeming regret that she had dismissed Phillip three years ago. And Ferris hated her. Olivia Summers had the indisputable talent for making Ferris feel like an employee, and the interloper she knew she was.

"Fancy seeing you here," Blackheart drawled from directly behind her, and Ferris screamed.

She rose to her full five feet four, her eyes blazing. "Don't you ever," she said furiously, "do that again. What are you doing here, anyway?" she demanded fiercely.

"My job."

"How did you get in, Blackheart? The Carleton House security team was supposed to let me know if they gave out any keys."

He smiled that devilish smile, and her heart gave a little moan at its remembered effect. "I didn't need a key."

Her lip curled. "Of course you didn't. How could I have forgotten?" she mocked.

"You know, I rather like the way you say Blackheart," he mused. "Most people call me Patrick."

"Blackheart suits you."

"What's in a name?" he quoted softly, that devilish light in his eyes. "Ferris Byrd doesn't suit you one tiny bit."

"I like it," she said stubbornly, refusing to give an inch.

"Of course you do. When I'm finished for the day, Ferris Byrd, let me take you out to dinner and I'll pry all your secrets from you."

"Go to hell." She had turned to leave when his hand caught her arm.

"Come, Francesca," he said. "Your secrets are safe with me. I'll even tell you a few of my own."

"Blackheart," she said, and she never thought she'd plead with any man. But she was pleading with him.

He reached out a hand and touched a strand of her thick cloud of dark hair. "I like it loose. So tell me, Francesca Berdahofski, what are you do-

ing today?" he inquired casually. "I need some help, and I thought you'd be the perfect candidate to assist me."

"You bastard. If you think you can blackmail me into helping you steal the emeralds, you must be out of your mind," she spat at him.

"You really do have a vicious opinion of me, don't you? How am I going to convince you I've given up my sor-did past?"

What else did he know about her, besides her real name? "What do you need help with?" she said, stalling.

"My first step is to make sure that no one from the outside can get in to steal the emeralds. There are alarms on every window on the second, third and fourth floors, except for the Palladian window in the back of the second floor hallway. I presumed no one bothered because only one narrow section opens, and the entire thing is in full view of the downstairs hallway."

"And?"

"And, I'm not convinced that someone might not be able to manage it. I don't think the view is unrestricted at all, I think there's a blind spot. I want to see whether I can get in without you seeing me. So you'll help me, Francesca?"

"Stop calling me that! My name is Ferris."

"Your name is Francesca. You never changed it legally," he retorted calmly.

"I don't like the name."

"Tough. It suits you, with that cloud of midnight hair and your magnificent breasts heaving in rage."

"Damn you, why did you check up on me?" she demanded.

"I had Kate run a routine check on all the major people connected with the Puffin Ball and the Von Emmerling emeralds." His voice was a seduction. "I thought you were my prime suspect."

She stared at him in absolute amazement, and then he reached out one of his strong, beautiful hands, placing a long finger under her chin and closing her mouth. "You'll catch flies, Francesca," he murmured, that devilish light in his eyes. "Now let's see to Carleton House. You wouldn't want Phillip to hear you've been uncooperative, would you?"

"There's a lot you could tell Phillip," she said gracelessly.

"But I wouldn't," he said, touching her shoulder.

"Then I'm no longer on the top of your list of suspects?" she said lightly.

His hand tightened on her shoulder, and she felt him lean toward her. And then the moment passed, and she breathed a small, uncertain sigh. "I'll trust you, Francesca," he said, "when you trust me."

Damn, but he was getting himself in trouble, Blackheart thought. Deeper and deeper, eyes wide open as he walked directly into the mire. At thirty-six he should have known better. It must be his restless streak acting up again. If he couldn't risk life and limb scrambling over buildings, he could risk the far too secure tenor of his life by messing with the bundle of contradictions by his side.

Of course, there was an obvious answer to the problem—stop being around her. But he couldn't resist—the danger pulled him like a magnet, and

that cool, to-hell-with-you expression on her face was a challenge he couldn't resist.

She turned those magnificent green eyes on him. "Why do you always try to goad me, Blackheart?"

"Because I like to make you mad."

"Why, for heaven's sake?"

"It shakes you up and keeps you from looking down that very pretty nose at me."

"I don't look down my nose at you."

"Sure you do. I'm still not quite sure why. Were you molested by a cat burglar when you were a child?"

She turned to look at him then. "You're the one who's so knowledgeable about my past. Didn't they tell you about that?"

"A molesting cat burglar? No, that somehow slipped past my informants. They said you come from a very large, very poor family from a small farming community outside of Chicago. Your father was Polish, your mother Italian, and you're one of eight children. There was never much money, but it sounds as if there was plenty of love."

"Maybe too much love," Ferris said slowly. "And I'm one of nine children. I had a younger sister who died when she was twelve. Of kidney failure."

Blackheart was silent for a moment, digesting this. "Do you think if you'd had money she wouldn't have died?"

He was astute, she had to grant him that. She said, "I think if we'd had money I wouldn't have to wonder about it." She looked at him then, with a sudden, savage pain in her green eyes, turning them from a distant sea

color to a deep forest hue. "Do you know how many nieces and nephews I have? Twenty-two. Twenty-two from seven brothers and sisters. Every single one of them either had a baby on the way when they got married or had one within a year after the wedding."

"And you decided that wasn't going to happen to you?"

"You're damned right. I wasn't going to be trapped in that cycle of babies and poverty. I finished high school a year early, got a scholarship to Stanford, and haven't looked back."

His voice was cool. "That still doesn't quite explain why you disapprove of me so heartily."

She looked at him for a long moment, considering something, he wasn't sure what. "When I was eleven years old," she said slowly, "I wanted to be a Spanish dancer." There was a dreamy note in her voice, bringing back a nostalgic, painful past, and Blackheart listened intently. "One spring afternoon I'd walked into town, and there in the local five-and-dime was a pair of red shoes. They were made from a sparkly, shiny kind of stuff. I wanted them so badly that it made me ache inside. Every day after school I'd go in and look at them. And then one day I went in and no one was there. The grain store had caught on fire, and everyone was out watching it burn." She closed her eyes. "I didn't even touch them. I just stared at them, and then I turned around and ran out of the store, ran all the way home."

He didn't say anything. He didn't know what to say. The sound of pain in her voice was fresh and new, from a wound that had never healed.

She opened her eyes again, turning her head to look at him. "No one, in the history of the world, has ever wanted anything as much as I wanted those red shoes. No one. And if I didn't take them, if I turned around and left without touching them when I wanted them that much, then there's no excuse for what you were. None at all."

He wanted to lean over and kiss her. He wanted to make love to her on that hard, shiny floor, make love to her until she wept, till she cried away all the years of hurt that kept her heart locked away behind Ralph Lauren suits. And then he'd make love to her again, slowly, aching, until...

THIS WAS a ridiculous thing to be doing, Ferris thought, leaning against the newel post on the long, curving staircase in the front hall of Carleton House. She should be home, waiting for Phillip's phone call.

After stationing her midway up the winding staircase, Blackheart had disappeared out the front door. He was supposed to make his way through the windows with their elaborate alarm system, pilfer a scarf he'd placed in a second-floor bedroom, and end up back in the ballroom without her seeing him. There was no way he could do it—she'd watched the upstairs hallway like a hawk, determined to catch him.

A quiet sound caught her attention, and she whirled around, ready to flash him a triumphant smile. He was standing in the doorway of the ballroom, the silk scarf in his hand, that damned smug grin on his face.

"How did you do it?" she demanded flatly.

"Never ask a magician to reveal his tricks."

She moved slowly down the steps. "This is supposed to reassure me as to your trustworthiness? You've now demonstrated just how easily you can burglarize a burglarproof house, you won't even tell me how, and yet you expect me to trust you."

"No, I don't expect you to trust me. That, it appears, would be asking too much." He held out his hand.

Ignoring his hand, she moved past him. He was so damned attractive. And that infuriating smile of his was half the attraction.

She got as far as the door to the hallway when he caught up with her. His hands were gentle but so very strong on her shoulders as he turned her back to face him. "Don't be afraid of me, Francesca," he said softly. "I'm not going to hurt you."

She met his gaze steadily, making no move to break free. "Then let go of me," she whispered.

"Oh, love," he murmured. "I can't do that." His head dropped down, his mouth catching hers in a deep searching kiss as his hands slid down her shoulders, down her back, molding her body to his.

She was lost. Her arms slid around his waist, holding him close against her. She couldn't think, couldn't fight the sensual onslaught of his mouth and hands and her sudden, unbearable wanting—

"My, my, we seem to have come at a bad time." Olivia Summers's coolly

amused tones broke through the haze of passion like a bucket of ice water.

"What are you doing here, Olivia?" he questioned. Blackheart gave Ferris's arms a subtly reassuring squeeze before releasing her.

"Actually, I had a few measurements to make. I appear to have lost my notes, and Dale was a perfect lamb and offered to bring me over. It appears I interrupted a . . . conference?" she queried delicately, her patrician nose raised in amused disdain. "Honestly, Patrick, you're up to your old tricks again. Do you and Trace always have to have a new conquest with each job?" Olivia laughed her soft, condescending laugh. "And if you have no pity for poor Ferris, think of Phillip."

"Olivia, I think there's someone here." Dale Summers's rich, fruity voice came from the hallway, preceding his lanky form. Spying Blackheart and Ferris, Olivia's husband came to a halt, and a blush came over his long, bony face.

His obvious embarrassment only made Ferris more miserable. But there was no way she was going to leave Olivia with the upper hand. "Go ahead with whatever you were planning, Olivia. Blackheart and I were just finishing."

"Really?" Olivia raised one exquisite eyebrow. "It looked to me as if you'd just begun." She took a step toward Ferris's still figure, leaning forward in a confiding fashion. "Listen, darling, I'd never realized that we had such similar taste in men. First Phillip and now Patrick. Why don't we trade men for the afternoon? You'll find

Dale can manage a creditable performance when properly inspired."

Ferris's hand clenched into a fist. She strode past them, ignoring Olivia's amused smile. By the time she reached the broad front steps she was shaking with rage; by the time she reached the car she was swearing and cursing in words taught to her by her brothers in deepest secret.

*

YESTERDAY hadn't been the best day of her life, starting with Blackheart and ending with Phillip's querulous phone call. Even Phillip's querulousness was gentle and charming, and Ferris felt like every kind of traitor as she soothed his ruffled feathers. A traitor because she'd responded to Patrick Blackheart's kiss far more enthusiastically than she ever had to Phillip's restrained necking.

Ferris was still trying to sleep when she heard the restrained batting against the door that opened onto her terrace. She tossed the covers back with a glad cry to survey the fierce-looking gray alley cat outside on her terrace.

"Blackie!" she cried, flopping across her bed and reaching for the door handle. "Where have you been?"

Blackie the alley cat expressed his thoughts with a feline sneer and headed for the kitchen.

"You've been gone for three days this time, Blackie," she informed him as she opened a can of cat food. "It's Dixie Dinner, your favorite."

Blackie bit daintily into the food, slowly enough to show his disapproval. Ferris knew full well that the moment she turned her back he'd scarf

it down in record time. "I should have left you in that alley," she said ruefully.

It took her longer than usual to whirl through the apartment, straightening the mess she'd made the day before. Blackie followed her, weaving between her legs and doing his best to trip her.

She made it to Carleton House at more than her usual breakneck speed. The Honorable Hortense Smythe-Davies was arriving that very morning, with the Von Emmerling emeralds in tow. The parking lot was filled with cars.

She scampered up the steps two at a time, entering the ballroom in a rush. The women were clustered three deep around an immensely tall old lady with a crown of white hair.

"Have you seen the gems?" Blackheart whispered in her ear, startling her.

"Not yet," she said grumpily. "I'll see them soon enough."

"They'd go beautifully with those eyes of yours."

"No, thank you. Diamonds are more my style." She'd forgotten to wear her ring today, but she clenched her left hand, drawing Blackheart's attention to it, and he smiled.

He was leaning against the paneled wall beside her, entirely at ease. "I'm afraid I disagree. Have you ever made love in nothing but an emerald necklace? Of course, pearls might be better. I can just see you, draped in yards of pearls. I imagine I could put my hand to some."

"I imagine you could. No, thank you."

"You mean it's just going to be skin to skin when we make love?" he inquired, a thread of laughter in his soft, warm voice. "I thought I was going to have to be very inventive when I got you in bed. Come on, Fra—Ferris. What did you do the last time you made love?"

Things were getting out of hand, as they always seemed to when she was around Blackheart. "I told Tommy Stanopoulos that I wouldn't."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The last time I made love, I didn't. I'm wearing white on my wedding day, Blackheart. Well-deserved white." Why in God's name was she telling him, she wondered.

Blackheart went very still, and without another word he turned and walked away from her.

So why did she feel bereft?

"What'dya say to him?" Kate Christiansen had ambled away from the group of entranced women. "He doesn't often lose his temper. I want you to leave him alone."

"What?" It came out in a little shriek, and Olivia turned her regal head to glance at them, a smug expression in her blue eyes.

"I said, leave him alone. I don't think he needs a broken heart." That was pain in Kate's flinty eyes, and the pale mouth in her freckled face trembled slightly.

"Are you in love with him?" Ferris couldn't quite believe it, but neither could she fathom the emotion she was eliciting from Blackheart's assistant.

"Don't be ridiculous," Kate snapped. "He and Trace are my buddies. You go to hell, Miss Berdahof-

ski." And she stomped out in her boss's wake.

Regina glided up with the unconscious grace that had taken Ferris months to perfect. "Did Phillip manage to track you down yesterday? He called me hoping I'd know where you were."

"He got in touch with me a little after seven," Ferris said.

"Phillip was very upset that he couldn't find you. I told him not to be such a baby."

There were times when Ferris thought she liked Regina Merriam even more than she liked her very likable son. She liked her too much to lie to her. "Regina, I have a miserable headache. Do you suppose the entire Puffin Ball will collapse if I go home?"

"I think you've ensured that things will run smoothly without your presence. Go ahead home, darling, and take your phone off the hook," Regina said.

"Bless you, Regina."

"What should I tell Patrick when he asks?" she queried slyly.

"Tell him I've moved to Siberia." On impulse she leaned over and gave the slender lady a hug. "I don't deserve you, Regina."

"Nonsense. It's the Merriams who don't deserve you. I hope for our sake that we get you, but I want to make sure you know what you're doing."

That was too loaded a statement for Ferris to question. With another squeeze she headed back out into the cool San Francisco sunlight.

BLACKHEART still couldn't understand why he was so mad at her. If he had

any sense at all, he ought to be pleased that Ferris had resisted the young men who must have thrown themselves at her magnificent feet. There was no doubt, no question in his mind that he would have her sooner or later—why wasn't he obscurely pleased that he'd be the first?

Part of him was. Part of him revelled in the fact that whether Francesca Berdahofski knew it or not, her first lover was going to be a retired cat burglar and not the society blue blood she'd set her matrimonial sights on.

So why did the thought of her still being a virgin bug him so much? He had the unpleasant feeling that it was because he was afraid. Afraid of Francesca, of the depth of her feelings, of the entanglement that would result if he broke through twenty-nine years of defenses as he knew he could. And if he was willing to go through all that trouble, was he willing to pay the price likely to be demanded? He still wasn't quite sure.

OLIVIA was pleased, very pleased indeed. Things were falling into place with delightful ease. If things went as they should, she would be able to close up that little room, get rid of all that electronic equipment, and live the life she wanted.

Of course, enough people would remember her lucrative sideline. Distribution of certain damning videotapes and the high prices commanded by them would be bound to leave an indelible memory in certain embarrassed gentlemen of wealth and power. Which was all to the good. When Olivia made her move, ran for politi-

cal office herself, there would be plenty of people who still owed her. A deliberately careless word here or there could do untold harm.

No, she would have a lot of people eager to help her. And all the money she needed, once the emeralds were liquidated. If things just continued to go her way.

Olivia smiled dreamily. Fate wouldn't dare do otherwise.

*

IT WAS probably just as well that Blackheart was keeping such a low profile, Ferris thought. He seemed to have had an uncanny knack of avoiding her during the past few days. Every time she walked into a room he'd find a reason to leave, every time she had to seek out a member of Blackheart, Inc., Trace Walker would appear, a beaming smile on his affable face. Patrick was there in an advisory capacity—if she had any questions, Trace was more than happy to answer them. He was more than happy to drape one of his heavy, muscled arms around her slight frame, more than happy to invite her out to dinner, more than happy to flirt outrageously.

Fortunately he took no for an answer with equanimity, his enthusiasm not the slightest bit diminished by her constant refusals.

Thank God it was almost over. Phillip was murmuring something about announcing their engagement at the Puffin Ball, and in another four months Francesca Berdahofski would be Mrs. Senator Phillip Merriam. Damn it, no. Ferris Byrd would be Mrs. Senator Phillip Merriam God,

Blackheart, what have you done to me?

She stumbled in the door, feeling weary, depressed and very sorry for herself. She was going to go collapse on her bed and sleep the sleep of the just.

Her blouse and jacket were off, her skirt a pile on the floor, when she heard the thin, distant thread of sound in her rambling apartment. There was also a pool of light coming from her bedroom.

She found him lying stretched out on her bed, a pile of pillows propped behind him. In the middle of his chest was a large patch of fur. Better known as Blackie, the wandering alley cat. The human cat smiled up at her lazily.

"What—"

He joined her in perfect unison. "—the hell are you doing here, Blackheart?" he mimicked. "Watching *Topkapi* and waiting for you. Does Phillip know you wear sexy underwear next to that virginal body of yours?"

It was too late for her to run screaming for a bathrobe. Besides, the hip-length silk chemise covered more than what she wore on the beach. "Blackheart, I'm going to call the police."

"No, you aren't," he said. "It would make too big a scandal. You're going to climb on the bed and watch *Topkapi* with me. I promise not to make a pass at you."

"Please, Blackheart," she said, hating the sound of pleading in her voice. "I'm tired. Please go home and let me get some sleep."

Smiling, he shook his head, patting the bed beside him. "I promise, Fran-

cesca. I won't try to have my wicked way with you."

Was she demented in her old age?
"Can I trust you?"

That mocking grin twisted his mouth. "For tonight you can," he said. "I can't promise you more than that."

And she believed him. Or was too besotted to know the difference. With a sigh she flicked off the overhead light and crawled across the huge bed on her hands and knees till she reached him. Blackie took one look at her, a disgruntled expression on his face, and left.

He made no move to grab her, and slowly she began to relax. "He's a great cat," Blackheart said gently. "What's his name?"

"Blackie."

"Very original. Except that he's not black—he's a dark gray."

"I know that, I have eyes. I named him after you. I'd read about the infamous retired cat burglar in *San Francisco Nightlife* and thought it was a good name for an alley cat."

"I'm flattered."

She relaxed against him. It really was comfortable, lying there next to him. His shoulder was surprisingly cozy, considering that it was composed of bone and muscle and not an ounce of soft fat.

"Why did you become a thief in the first place?" Ferris asked sleepily.

"Thief's a little crass, but I suppose it's accurate enough. I was merely following the family tradition. My father was one of the most famous... thieves in the history of British society burglary. He knew his

victims well enough to know who could afford to lose a diamond or two. I think he did it more for the excitement than the money. He made as much gambling, I think."

"What happened to your parents?"

"My mother died when I was twelve. Some complications after gall-bladder surgery. My father died four years later." His voice was even, his eyes trained on the television, but that strong, beautiful hand of his was stroking her thick dark hair with a steady, soothing beat.

"How did he die?" Ferris asked quietly.

"Occupational hazard. He fell one night. His partner was counting on him, and I took his place." His calm, matter-of-fact voice allowed for no pity.

"And what made you quit? You must have been at it a long time—ten years?"

"Closer to fifteen. And I didn't retire—it retired me. Same thing as my father. I fell."

"Is that when you went to prison?"

"Yes." The short syllable was neutral.

"Do you miss cat burglary?" she asked in a small voice.

"Sometimes. Not often. Not right now. There's no place I'd rather be than lying in bed with the virginal Francesca Berdahofski," he said lightly.

"Don't tease me," she said sleepily. He was still stroking her head, gentle, soothing strokes.

"I can't help it. You're so teasing."

She curled into him like a contented cat. "Wake me when you leave." She shut her eyes, nestling closer still, and one slender hand closed around his shoulder. A moment later she was sound asleep.

Blackheart looked down at the woman lying in his arms, the wonders of *Topkapi* forgotten. He'd kept away from her as long as he could, far longer than he wanted to. And now he really didn't know why. He didn't even bother to think about where this was leading.

FERRIS was aware of several things. It was another gray day. There was a heavy weight on her feet—Blackie, most likely. And a mouth was nibbling at her earlobe.

She opened her eyes, whipping her head around to stare at the man in bed with her. She was lying curled up in his arms, her long bare ankles tangled with his, her breasts just touching his chest through the thin silk chemise.

"Hello," he said, his mouth so near that the soft breath tickled her skin. Slowly, thoroughly, he began to kiss her, his tongue teasing past her teeth, exploring the soft, trembling contours of her willing mouth.

Her hands were trapped between their bodies, there was nothing she could do but spread them against the warm, enticing skin of his chest, threading her restless fingers through the fine, crinkly hair. He felt so good to her hands, so strong and warm and alive, and she wanted to feel all of him.

His mouth moved away from hers, reluctantly, and his eyes were black as

midnight as they looked down into her love-dazed ones.

She rolled away, pulling the skimpy chemise around her exposed body. Blackheart lay back, crossing his arms behind his head. She could see his chest rise and fall with the effort at controlling his breathing.

"You're blushing," he drawled.

"You told me you wouldn't do that. Wouldn't try to make love to me," she said in a strangled voice.

"I said I wouldn't last night. I never made any promises about the morning."

"I trusted you."

"No, you didn't," he corrected her mildly. "You were just tired and a little willing to play with fire. And I just proved to you how trustworthy I could be." His self-deprecating smile was only slightly mocking. He continued to eye her from his position on the bed. "In return you might do me a small favor."

Ferris looked at him warily. "What?"

"Put some more clothes on. I could always change my mind," he murmured.

Ferris fled.

Sooner or later he was going to have Miss Francesca Berdahofski exactly where he wanted her, he thought as she scampered off. In his arms, in his bed, in his life.

Never had he wanted a job to end sooner. He had no choice but to put Francesca out of his mind for the time being, or a troop of Girl Scouts could march into the middle of the Puffin Ball and carry off the emeralds under his nose. Business first. And then

pleasure, he promised himself. Pulsing, pounding, delirious pleasure. For him, but most especially for her.

A wicked smile wreathed his face. Most especially for her, he thought.

"ARE YOU sure we ought to go through with this, Olivia?" Dale questioned with that well-bred whine that was one of his most irritating characteristics. "I mean, we're taking a pretty big chance, and—"

"Don't be tiresome, Dale. I've looked at it from every possible angle, taken care of any possible loophole."

"What about our unwilling partner? Don't you think Blackheart...?"

"Blackheart, Inc., will go down the tubes once they're implicated in the theft," Olivia said coolly. "No one is going to believe their protests of innocence. The police will know someone had to be paid off. They simply won't be able to find out who did the paying and who did the collecting."

"But what if—"

"Enough 'what ifs,' Dale! It's too late for cold feet. Now why don't you go downstairs and see what's keeping our confederate? I don't want cold feet to be catching."

*

HER DRESS was a slight departure from her usual boring good taste. It was a deceptively simple white sheath made of a clingy, silky material, with cunning drawstrings that could raise the side slit from below the knee to half-way up her thigh, could move the neckline from somewhere near her

waist up to the polite vicinity of her collarbone. She had opted for the most coverage available.

Ferris stood off to one side, half hidden by the heavy damask draperies that shut the fog-ridden night away from the gaiety of the crowded ballroom. The Puffin Ball was a smashing success, and Ferris had never felt worse in her life.

From the moment she'd arrived she'd been on display, an ornament on Phillip's very urbane arm. She'd smiled till her jaw ached, and her eyes were permanently crinkled. She would have given ten years off her life to go home right then, but she knew it was out of the question. She wouldn't have a moment's peace until the damned jewels were no longer even remotely her responsibility. And then there would be no reason ever to see John Patrick Blackheart again.

Whenever Phillip had drawn her into an admiring circle of men, Blackheart would be nearby, glaring at her. Every time one of Phillip's political cronies danced with her, and the times were far too numerous to count, Blackheart's expression darkened, and when Phillip finally drew her to the floor, executing turns and dips, his face was nothing short of thunderous. Ferris had smiled, moving closer to her fiancé's stalwart form, each time she had caught sight of that unrestrained fury.

And she had watched him, from over Phillip's tall, broad shoulder, past Regina's stately coiffure, beyond the punch bowl and over the champagne. And every now and then his eyes would meet hers, and sparks would shoot

through her body, and she'd wonder how Phillip could miss her very strong physical reactions.

Some of her tension must have penetrated for at the end of the last dance he'd sent her upstairs to lie down. "You're wound up as tight as a spring, Ferris. I can carry on without you. You've had a grueling week, I'm sure."

"So have you," she replied.

"I'm used to it," he assured her. "And I thrive on this sort of thing. I thought you did, too."

If she could say one thing for Phillip, it was that he was abnormally perceptive. "I usually do," she admitted. Reaching up on tiptoes, she kissed him on his smooth, scented cheek. "I'll be back before too long."

With a smile, she turned to leave. And there was Blackheart.

"Phil," he said lightly, ignoring her. "Dale Summers was looking for you."

"Thanks, Patrick. See that my lady gets upstairs for a rest, would you? She's worn out."

"Be glad to," he said blandly. "Come on, Ferris." One strong, well-shaped hand covered hers with unnecessary force, and Phillip turned away.

Without a word he led her up the stairs, stopping halfway up. "I think the senator's lady is more than capable of finding a bedroom on her own."

"You're jealous," she said, her voice soft with wonder.

His black expression didn't change. "Damn straight. If you marry him and spend the rest of your life as Mrs. Senator Ferris Byrd Merriam, you'll deserve it."

"How about ending my life as Mrs. President Ferris Byrd Merriam," she taunted.

"How about Mrs. Francesca Berdahofski Blackheart?"

That effectively wiped the smile off her face. "What?" she managed in a choked voice. "Are you serious?"

"That look of pained disbelief is hardly flattering," Blackheart drawled. Without another word, he turned and left her on the stairs.

That was when her headache had started. She shook her head, trying to clear the mass of confusion, and continued up the stairs.

How did the man manage to move so silently, she wondered. Could she ever learn to move about as silently? If you stepped just the right way on the ball of your foot, she discovered—

"Darling?" A woman's voice sighed deeply, and she heard the rustle of clothing.

Ferris froze in place. The third-floor hallway was dimly lit, but she had no trouble at all recognizing Olivia Summers clasped in a fevered embrace. And the man holding her was distinctive enough. She'd know Trace Walker anywhere.

Never in her life had Ferris been so embarrassed and so fascinated. Cool, snotty Olivia wasn't just kissing Trace Walker, she was climbing all over him, her greedy hands pawing at him.

And then her hackles began to rise, as she recognized which bedroom the two of them had chosen for their tryst. The third-floor front bedroom was where the Von Emmerling emeralds were to be kept when they weren't on display or hanging around some lady's

neck. And sure enough, that's exactly where they were, clasped around Olivia's skinny throat. They looked prettier than Ferris remembered them, more delicate, and the emeralds shone more brightly.

Ferris couldn't stand around and let them use a fortune's worth of jewels as an erotic toy. She was about to clear her throat when she noticed the small dim figure by the far door. It was Kate Christiansen watching the embracing couple. She was wearing an unflattering floor-length dress of peach chiffon that made her short body look dumpy, and the expression on her face was a mixture of anger and such pain that it hurt Ferris to see it. She just stood there, her anguished eyes dark in her freckled face, too distraught to notice Ferris.

Slowly, imperceptibly, Ferris backed away. Kate would interrupt them. The jewels would be safe.

By the time Ferris reached the stairs she could hear the voices from the bedroom, low, slightly embarrassed voices. There would be no problem.

THE TWO women watched Trace Walker leave the room, an embarrassed angle to his shoulder. She'd played it well, Olivia thought. Trace was so embarrassed at having been caught in such a compromising position that he'd put the responsibility of the emeralds low on his list of priorities. He hadn't liked the expression on Kate's face one tiny bit. As she'd suspected, there was something more there than poor little Kate recognized. Her grand passion might not be as unre-

quited as she supposed. Really, the whole thing was laughable.

"Don't glare at me, Kate, darling," Olivia said easily, unfastening the clasp on the phony emeralds. "Have you got the real jewels?"

*

HER APARTMENT was still and silent as she let herself in. Phillip waited by her door, a smile on his tired, handsome face. "You're dead on your feet," he observed kindly. "I won't come in. It's almost four in the morning. I was glad to see that you and Patrick managed to get along," he added. "They did a great job, don't you think?"

"I suppose so. No one stole the emeralds, and that's the main thing." It had been with mixed emotions that she had watched the assembled staff of Blackheart, Inc., drive off with the beautiful gems safe in their possession. Blackheart must have lost his touch, though. He'd barely given them a cursory glance as he'd shoved the velvet cases into a briefcase that resembled something out of a James Bond movie. And he'd driven away from her, out of her life, without a backward glance.

Ferris looked up at Phillip. "Why are you so concerned?"

"Something my mother said," he replied lightly. "Apparently you two fight like cats and dogs. I've never known you not to get along with someone, no matter how offensive you find them. My mother was concerned, and so was I. You know how much Mother adores you. She's always considered you far too good for me."

"Don't be ridiculous. Your mother worships you."

He grinned. "Of course she does. But that doesn't mean she'll sacrifice your happiness for my well-being. Think about it, Ferris."

"Think about what?" she said irritably. "If you want to talk about this, in depth, we can do so tomorrow when I've had more rest. All right?"

He gave her his charming, rueful smile. "I'd like that, darling, I really would. But I've got to be in Santa Cruz for the next three days, and then Sacramento, and then—"

"I understand," she said, her voice calm and accepting. "And you're right, I am dead tired. Why don't you give me a call this week when you have a chance."

He stood there, still in the doorway, half in her apartment, half out, half in her life, half out, and Ferris fingered her diamond ring.

"Well," he said. "Well. Good night, then." He seemed uncharacteristically uncertain. Reaching up on her toes, she kissed that sweet-smelling, smooth-shaven cheek. And there was no way she could fool herself into thinking it wasn't goodbye.

"Good night, Phillip."

His footsteps clattered down the two flights of stairs.

She kicked off her heels and let her bare feet sink into the carpet. She did need her bed, and she needed a drink to take the edge off the nervous energy that was still sparking through her.

She trailed out into the kitchen, poured herself a small glass of Drambuie and wandered back into the darkened living room. Without both-

ering to turn on the lights, she curled up on the sofa.

The sound of the buzzer startled her out of her pleasant reverie. Leaning back she stared at her blank white door. The bell rang again. She wasn't about to get up.

There was a long pause on the other side of the door, and then it opened. And Blackheart stood there, a package in one hand, a furious expression on his face.

He was wearing jeans again, and his boots, and the black, body-hugging turtleneck beneath a corduroy jacket. She had never liked turtleneck shirts on men, but on Blackheart the effect was absolutely demoralizing. She wondered what he was angry about now.

"A stoned-out junkie with a credit card could get through those locks."

"Why would a stoned-out junkie have a credit card?" Ferris inquired prosaically as he moved toward her with his usual feline grace. "What's in the box?"

Blackheart pulled it out from under his arm, looking at it as if he'd never seen it before. "A present for you." He tossed the box to her, and she caught it expertly. "Open it. Consider it a farewell present. Open it," he said again.

It was a pair of red shoes, made of shiny, metallic crimson, with high stacked heels, diamond buckles and no toes. There were little metal taps on the heel and toe, and she turned to look at Blackheart, her face very still.

Her voice was very quiet in the darkened room. "Why?"

He didn't pretend to misunderstand. "I thought you ought to have

something to remind you of Francesca Berdahofski when you're Mrs. Senator Merriam."

The shoes lay in her lap, and she stared down at them. She was used to tears. She cried when she was frightened, she cried when she was unhappy. But she couldn't understand why the tears were stinging her eyelids, burning the back of her throat, taking control of her body so that she sat there and shook.

She felt him rise from the love seat. "Goodbye, Ferris," he said gently, leaning over to kiss her cheek. "Have a good life."

"Don't call me Ferris," she said with great, hiccuping sobs. "I hate that damned name."

"Francesca..." She could feel his hand on her shoulder, the fingers strong and warm on her bare skin.

She raised her head. "And don't you dare leave me," she added, her voice raw with tears. "Don't you dare."

It was too dark in the room to see his face through her blur of tears, but his voice was clear. "Oh, love, I wouldn't think of it." And he drew her weeping body off the couch.

She stumbled into his arms, and his mouth dropped onto hers, nibbling, tantalizing. She could feel a knot of wanting so strong that hurt twisted deep inside her.

She wanted him with a longing she'd never felt before. She wanted his warm bare skin beneath her fingers, smooth and hot and hard beneath her mouth, she wanted him above her, beneath her, around her and in her; she wanted to melt into the golden wonder of his body and never escape.

"Blackheart, please take me to bed and show me what it can be like."

He was very strong indeed. He lifted her with fluid grace, moving through the darkened apartment. The first gray light of dawn was spreading over the city as he drew her down on the gigantic bed.

Slowly, deftly, his hands withdrew down the length of her body, bringing the silky gown with him, his gaze washing over her.

He stripped the turtleneck over his head with one swift move, kicking off his boots as he did so. He slid into bed with her, dropping his jeans beside the bed.

He brought her hand to his mouth, kissing each trembling finger, one by one, letting his tongue gently caress her palm. And then he placed her open, relaxed hand on his chest, letting her become accustomed to the feel of his flesh against her, the muscle and hardness. Slowly he moved her hand downward, sensitive to her slightest hesitation. Her eyes met his, mesmerized, as he brought her hand down to meet his swollen maleness.

The quick intake of breath was his own, and when he opened his eyes again she was smiling at him. "There," he breathed. "That's not so bad, is it?"

She shook her head. He released her wrist, but her hand stayed where it was, the fingers cool and curious on his fevered skin. Slowly she encircled him, tugging gently, and he moaned softly.

She pulled away. "Did I hurt you?"

With a lazy smile he shook his head, recapturing her curious hand. "It feels very good," he whispered against her

lips. "Too good." And he moved his hands to her waiting body, encircling her slender waist with his long deft fingers. They slid across her gently rounded stomach, sliding inexorably toward their ultimate goal.

She hadn't known it could be so sweet. His hands were clever, so clever, and she could feel that burning need within her escalate out of control, until she knew she'd explode if she had to wait any longer. She touched him, and he was as damp as she was. She looked up through a haze of desire.

"It's just me, wanting you," he said softly, his lips brushing hers, and she smiled against his mouth.

"Me too," she whispered. "Now, Blackheart. Please."

And then his body covered her, and she could feel him against her, hard and strong and needful. She wasn't expecting the pain, the sharp burning of stubbornly resisting flesh. Her quiet moan turned into a whimper.

"I didn't want to hurt you," he whispered, and she could feel the tension in his body.

Already the pain had begun to recede. She smiled up at him, love and longing all mixed up in a dazed, dreamy expression. "It's okay," she murmured. "It's more than okay. It's... very... nice..." The words drifted in a gasp of pleasure as he began to move, as his mouth caught hers in a searing kiss.

And she was lost, lost in the tumble of flesh, pulsing heat and aching want that somehow coalesced through the shifting, pounding rhythms of his body and hers. She was there, floating, dreaming, awash in a current of slum-

bering sensual wanderings, when suddenly it peaked, and she was gone, lost in some starry universe with only Blackheart for safety.

In the distance she felt him collapse against her, felt the shudders rack his body, heard the distant echo of his voice. The vast sense of well-being washed over her body and enveloped her in a cocoon.

He drew her into the circle of his arms, her head resting naturally against his shoulder. She smiled against his sweat-damp skin, her hand drifting lazily downward across his stomach. She watched with interest as the muscles contracted. "Blackheart?"

"Mmm?"

"Thank you."

He looked down at her, a lazy smile lighting his face. "My pleasure, love. My pleasure."

SHE DIDN'T want to hear the pounding. She felt too good, lying curled up against Blackheart's warm skin, nestled in the cradle of his body, his arm possessive around her body. His long brown hair was rumpled around his sleepy face, and the white quilt they'd thrown over them sometime during the night made his tanned skin stand out in golden contrast.

The pounding began again, louder than before, and Blackheart jumped up, grabbing his pants.

She grabbed a robe and yanked it on, reaching the living room just as he was opening the door. His jeans were zipped but unbuttoned, his bare chest had a few artistic scratches that she hadn't realized she'd contributed. Fer-

ris held her breath, expecting Phillip, expecting Regina, expecting God knew who. But not expecting the small man who stood there.

"Rupert," Blackheart said numbly, pulling the door open to let him storm in. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" the angry man demanded. "What the hell isn't wrong?"

"Since no one's making introductions," Ferris said, "would you mind telling me who you are?"

"I'm Rupert Munz," he snapped. "And I'm this idiot's lawyer. His partner was arrested last night for grand larceny. And the San Francisco police department are greatly interested in Patrick Blackheart's whereabouts."

"Grand larceny?" Ferris echoed, a horrid sense of déjà vu washing over her.

Blackheart had a grim expression on his face. "The Von Emmerling emeralds."

"There's nothing wrong with your thought processes," Rupert snapped. "And at least you had a good alibi." A jerk of his head indicated Ferris, and Blackheart's eyes followed meditatively. She knew what her face looked like, mistrust and condemnation wiping out the last trace of warmth. He'd used her, and she hated him for it.

She could tell by the darkening of his face that he read her reactions clearly.

"Has bail been set?" Blackheart snapped.

"Not yet. I was on my way back there when I thought I'd check here. Kate said you might be here. She's pretty upset, Patrick."

"I imagine she is." He was still staring at Ferris's shuttered face. "What do you want me to do?"

"Stay put. I'll check on what sort of evidence they have—they probably won't arrest you without something to go by. Unless they're so happy to finally be able to pin something on you that they don't bother with such technicalities. You don't need to worry—if they do, I'll slap a false arrest charge on them so fast their heads will spin."

There was dead silence in the apartment when the door closed behind Rupert's dapper figure. Ferris kept her face averted, the old terry-cloth robe pulled tightly around her as she turned to the kitchen. Her sense of betrayal left her numb and shaken.

"I get the feeling you'd be very happy to see me locked up right now, with the key thrown away."

She couldn't even trust herself to look at him, much less deny his gentle accusation. "Would you make me a cup of coffee before I go?" he said suddenly.

"You're going to abandon Trace," she accused him. "You're going to run off and leave him bearing the blame."

She had never seen such a look on any man's face. It was as cold and still as death, and she stumbled backward against the kitchen door in sudden panic.

An unpleasant smile curved his mouth. "I won't hit you, Ferris," he drawled. "Much as you deserve it. And you can believe what you want to believe. I'm not going to sit around and wait for the police to find me. I'm going to find out who did take the emeralds, and when I find them I'm go-

ing to shove them down your throat." He brushed past her on the way to the bedroom.

She was still standing there when he emerged, black turtleneck pulled over his tousled head, boots on his feet, his jacket slung over his shoulder.

The buzz of the doorbell shattered the tension. The two combatants stood there in the narrow hallway, motionless, condemning eyes watching the other. Ferris couldn't move, couldn't breathe, could only watch him with sudden desperation shattering her heart.

The bell buzzed again, impatiently, followed by a steady pounding. A wry smile lit Blackheart's bleak face: He moved past her, careful not to touch her body.

And still she stood there, as she heard the words drift past her. "You have the right to remain silent. If you give up that right . . ."

*

THEY WERE having tea in a small coffee shop in the Mark Hopkins after doing their best to placate a semihysterical Miss Smythe-Davies, and Ferris wished they'd opted for the bar instead. In the three days since the robbery and the arrests, all hell had broken loose.

"I just thank God that Patrick didn't have to spend the night in jail." Regina Merriam's patrician cheekbones were pink with indignation, and Ferris leaned forward to pat her hand.

"Sorry, Regina. I'm afraid when it comes to Blackheart I'm no judge of character at all." She sighed.

"Ladies," Olivia Summers's cool, arch tones broke into their conversation. "Miss Smythe-Davies didn't seem any happier to see me than she was to see you. I thought I'd help placate her, but I didn't seem to get any further than you did."

Regina gave her a distant, welcoming smile. "I expect Miss Smythe-Davies's shattered nerves are beyond mending. I'm afraid we were less than a success."

"Forgive my frankness, Regina, but are you sure you picked the right committee?" Olivia slid into the seat with her customary smooth grace. "Given the circumstances I would have thought Miss Byrd would have been a less than wise choice."

Amazement washed over Regina's beautiful, lined face. "What in the world are you talking about, Olivia?"

Olivia managed an expression of embarrassed concern. "The details of Patrick's arrest. I assumed since you were so intimately involved . . . I'm sorry, I've been indiscreet. Forget I said anything."

"I think I should," Regina snapped. Tossing the linen napkin down, she rose to her regal height. "I have things to do. Are you coming, Ferris?"

Ferris's wary green eyes went from Regina's disapproving expression to Olivia's sly smile. "I think I'll share a cup of tea with Olivia. Call me, Regina?"

"She's a dear soul," Olivia said with a bite of acid as they watched Regina thread her way gracefully through the closely set tables. "It's a shame she has to be disillusioned."

"Does she?" Ferris sat very still, waiting for Olivia to strike.

"Someone, at some time, will tell her."

"Tell her what?"

"Tell her about Francesca Berdahofski," Olivia murmured. "Tell her where Blackheart spent the night when he was trying to establish an alibi and where he was arrested the next day." Her pink mouth curved in a pleased smile.

But the look in Ferris's green eyes daunted even Olivia for a moment. A few little pieces of the puzzle had begun to fall into place. The unexpected arrival at Carleton House last Sunday. A tryst with more witnesses than she had expected. The Von Emmerling emeralds clasped around her skinny neck. Ferris smiled, a dangerous smile indeed. The only other person who knew about Francesca Berdahofski was Kate Christiansen. Ferris needed to talk with Blackheart.

"WHAT ARE YOU doing here?" Blackheart demanded roughly. Ferris could see movement behind him. And it looked like a woman. "Did you want to see what hideous mark five hours of American prison left on my recalcitrant soul?"

She hesitated, peering past him into the apartment. It was Kate. Relief washed over her, followed swiftly by determination as she pushed her way forward.

"Oh, no, just what I needed!" Kate greeted her from her curled-up position on the sofa.

Ferris paused just inside the doorway. The room was surprisingly wel-

coming, warm and comfortable and aesthetically pleasing. Despite the lump of angry female flesh smack-dab in the middle of it.

Kate had a thousand used tissues scattered around her, and red swollen eyes above her belligerent pout.

Ferris didn't particularly care about Kate's comfort. What she cared for was the truth.

She advanced into the room. "You must have been the one to tell Olivia Summers about my background," Ferris said easily. "I don't understand why you told her where Blackheart spent the night, though."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I don't even know Olivia Summers," she said staunchly.

"Certainly you do. You were watching her wrap her body around Trace Walker just three nights ago." Kate looked ghastly, her face papery white. "I was there. I saw your expression, Kate. You were mad as hell. What I don't understand is why, if you hate her so much, did you help her steal the emeralds?" Ferris said. A movement drew her attention, and she saw Blackheart.

Here it comes, Ferris thought. He's going to kick me out for sure.

Blackheart moved forward, taking Kate's plump hand in his, and his tawny eyes were dark with sadness. "Yes, Kate. Why did you help her?"

Her last bit of self-control vanished. She burst into loud, ugly sobs, her face crumpled in pain and shame.

"If only she hadn't come..."

"I knew, Kate. I always knew. I just didn't know how you managed it, and I still don't know why."

Kate shook her head miserably. "Blackmail. I—I did something. I shouldn't have... a few years back. I was in some—home movies, you might call them. With a few influential businessmen and politicians, and we weren't exactly fully dressed, if you know what I mean."

"Does she have the stuff in her apartment?"

Kate shook her head. "I don't know, Patrick. She didn't tell me or Dale a thing."

"Dale was in on it with her?" Ferris couldn't keep still a moment longer. "But why?"

Kate cast her a withering glance. "Gambling debts. And he does everything Olivia tells him."

"How did you do it, Kate?" Blackheart questioned, handing her a tissue as she snuffled noisily.

"Olivia got the copies made, and I carried them in a little bag sewed inside my dress." She blew her nose heartily into the tissue.

Blackheart leaned back wearily against the sofa. "That answers most of my questions," he murmured. "But it doesn't answer the most important one. What has she done with the emeralds?"

"Does it matter that much?" Ferris ventured.

The look he gave her held withering disdain. "They can't arrest Olivia without some proof. At this point it's only Kate's word against hers, and Olivia McKinley Summers's word holds a great deal more clout. We need proof."

"But what can you do?" Ferris asked.

His smile was mocking. "Not what can I do, Francesca, my trusting one. What can we do?" He smiled seraphically. "We're going to break into Olivia Summers's apartment."

*

IT WAS A cool, damp night, with a low-hanging mist that just might obscure the deadly drops between buildings, Ferris thought hopefully.

Even through her panic Ferris had to admire Blackheart. He picked the lock to the roof of a neighboring building with practiced ease, using a small collection of tools that resembled a manicurist's weapons. He looked like a cat, lean and lithe and dangerous, with his eyes aglow and his nerves tightly strung.

In the misty darkness the huddled shapes of the heating vents made eerie obstacles, but she kept her eyes trained on Blackheart's narrow back, unconsciously imitating his catlike grace. He was waiting for her at the far end.

"Ah, now that's more of a challenge."

Blackheart had taken a small cylinder from his pocket and was unfolding it into something that resembled a cross between an umbrella and an anchor. From somewhere in the murky mists of memory Ferris recognized it as a grappling hook. He tossed it expertly, and it caught on the next building, some twelve feet higher than their current uneasy level.

I can't do it, she thought. I simply can't do it. Blackheart was already up there, waiting patiently. "Come on, Francesca," he said softly, and his voice was daring her.

Some things were worth dying for, she thought dazedly, grabbing the rope. Was Blackheart one of them? He kept up a calming, gentle litany as she climbed, hand over hand, her moccasined feet bouncing off the opposite brick wall.

Then his hand was on her wrist like a vise, biting, blessedly painful, as he hauled her up the rest of the way. She kept herself stiff, not falling into his arms as she longed to do.

"Is this it?" she inquired, her face wet with the tears.

"One more," Blackheart said, and she felt herself being dragged to the opposite end of the roof.

There was a yawning abyss between the two buildings. A vast chasm of perhaps thirty inches.

Blackheart jumped first, making it look ridiculously easy—a child's hopscotch game. He stood on the other side, waiting for her. "Come on, Francesca," he said. "Trust me."

She leaped, not preparing herself, and her shins hit the edge of the opposite building. His hands clamped around her wrists and she was hauled onto the roof before her knees had even made contact with the building.

"Blackheart," she wailed. "No more rooftops."

"No more rooftops. Everything is downhill from now on. We're on Olivia's building. See those trees down there? That's her terrace."

He lowered her down the eight feet to Olivia's flagstone terrace, leaping after her. He used an American Express card, and the terrace door opened immediately and soundlessly.

He grinned. "I never leave home without it."

The bedroom and bathroom were washouts. Nothing secreted in the back of the toilet, hidden among the color-coordinated towels, concealed in the extra roll of toilet paper.

"I can't open that door." She gestured toward the locked door hidden beneath a row of curtains.

He gave it a critical look. "Piece of cake. Go to it, kid," he said blandly, leaning against the doorway.

Gracing him with an obscenity she seldom used, she set to work, jabbing at the keyhole in a fine temper.

"Don't be so rough," Blackheart advised. "You have to coax a lock to open, tease it open. Treat it like a lover, talk to it."

"Go to hell, Blackheart!"

"Of course, since that happens to be the way you talk to your lovers, it might be better if—"

"Oh, my God, I did it," Ferris breathed, sitting back on her heels in amazement as the knob turned.

Blackheart strode past her, giving her an approving pat on her capped hair. "Well, well, well. I think you've discovered how Olivia knew what Kate had become involved in. And how she's been making money for the last few years. Videotape machines, a video camera, tapes. Experimental filmmaking for very high profits. Blackmail," Blackheart drawled. "Why don't you go check her drawers one last time? We're running out of time."

Ferris left readily enough as he pushed her out the door, and she found the emeralds by accident.

She hadn't bothered to check the wastepaper basket the first time around—the idea had been too absurd. But the solid weight of a supposedly empty tissue box tipped her off. The Von Emmerling emeralds tumbled into her lap.

"I think I found them," Ferris said quietly.

He materialized by her side immediately, squatting down next to her. "You've got 'em, all right," he said, a rich note of satisfaction in his voice. "Put them back now, Francesca. We found out what we came for. The sooner we get out of here the better."

"Shouldn't we take them?" She was reluctantly shoving them back into their box.

"If I showed up at the police station with the Von Emmerling emeralds and some cock-and-bull story about the Summerses, I don't expect they'd waste too much time listening." He shook his head, rising to his full height. "They won't believe me until they get a search warrant and find the jewels themselves."

He headed for the door, and Ferris paused for a moment. Had the bedside light been on or off? She was about to call Patrick, but he was already gone.

Well, she'd just have to chance flicking it off.

THEY MADE their circuitous way back to Blackheart's apartment. He seemed positively lighthearted. Her nerves were still jumping, the blood pumping through her veins, and her hands were trembling slightly as he unlocked the

three professional-looking locks on his door.

"Your locks look a great deal more solid than mine," she said, striving for a calm she was far from feeling.

He swung the door open. "Those pieces of tinfoil on your door wouldn't stop an eight-year-old."

"I'll get them replaced."

"Do that," he murmured, and she could feel his soft breath on the back of her neck. She was trembling all over again, her knees weak, her heart pounding, her breath rapid in the thick darkness.

"Will they keep you out?"

His hot, wet mouth touched the vulnerable nape of her neck in a slow, lingering kiss. "Nothing will keep me out," he whispered against her sweetly scented skin.

The small, lost wail that came from her mouth could have been despair, could have been surrender, could have been protest, could have been all three. "Don't, Blackheart," she murmured brokenly. "Please, don't."

His hands caught her shoulders and turned her around to face him, and she could feel the tension running through his strong, lean body. Her own tension matched it. "Why not, Francesca? Give me one good reason to leave you alone and I will."

"I don't trust you," she said. "Do you want to go to bed with a woman who doesn't trust you?"

"No," he said, his hands cupping her face and holding it still. "But I saw you jump tonight, Francesca. You couldn't have done it if you didn't trust me." His lips feathered hers, lightly, tantalizingly, and she found herself

reaching for more. "Could you, Francesca?"

"No," she murmured against his mouth. "Yes." She no longer knew what she was saying, but she liked the sound of the latter. "Yes," she said again, kissing him. "Yes, yes, yes."

Their love was fast and furious, a celebration and a culmination of the tension and danger they had shared, washed clean by love and sweat. Ferris wanted to cling to him forever, wanted to keep her arms and legs wrapped around him, holding him tight against her. But he began to stir, restlessly, and she knew she had no choice but to let him go.

"Blackheart," she said wearily, "I'm in love with you. You know it—you've probably known longer than I have."

Blackheart just watched her, and she couldn't read the expression in his tawny eyes. Then he grinned at her, and sudden relief washed over her. It was going to be all right. "So you love me, do you?"

"Yes."

"What about the good senator?"

"The good senator will have to look elsewhere for a suitable . . . senatress," she said finally.

IN THE MORNING he looked down at her, sleeping so peacefully in the center of his dark blue sheets. She looked good there, with her thick mane of hair spread out around her. She looked like she belonged.

And he belonged there in bed with her. The last thing he felt like doing right now was trying to convince a

stubborn SFPD that Olivia Summers was the jewel thief, not he.

And once that was settled, then maybe he could figure out what he was going to do with Francesca-Ferris Berdahofski-Byrd. He didn't for one moment believe that she loved him. Her religion and her working-class upbringing had taught her that you have to love the man you sleep with. He had seduced her and *voilà*, true love! It would take care and time to elicit the real thing from her.

But that was exactly what he intended to do, once he got Olivia Summers sorted out. Because even if he didn't trust Ferris's protestations of true love, he knew exactly what he was feeling. For the first time in his life, in thirty-six misspent, fairly promiscuous years, he had fallen in love. And he wasn't about to give up without a fight.

*

THERE WAS a pot of coffee keeping warm on a hot tray, half a loaf of moldy bread in the bread box, and a six-pack of Beck's dark in the fridge. She'd go out and buy enough food to feed them both, and to hell with him if he thought she was being encroaching.

He'd left an extra set of keys on the hall table. Tossing them into her leather purse, she let herself out of the silent apartment and headed for the nearest food store.

It took her longer than she expected. By the time she was back on Blackheart's street her arms were aching, her ankles were tired and her stomach was knotted. So preoccupied was she that she almost didn't notice

the small dark Porsche parked illegally by the curb and the slender figure strolling casually down Blackheart's front steps.

Ducking quickly behind a large American car, she watched with dawning horror as Olivia made her way back to the Porsche, sliding into the front seat with a pleased expression hanging about her pale lips.

After Olivia drove off, Ferris ran the rest of the block to Blackheart's apartment and up the five flights of stairs. With shaking hands she fiddled with the three locks. They all turned beneath the key, and Ferris's blood ran cold. She'd only locked two of them.

And with a sudden, horrifying clarity Ferris remembered. The light beside Olivia's bed had been on when they'd broken in. And she had been stupid enough to turn it off when they left.

What had she done? Why had Olivia sneaked into Blackheart's apartment when no one was there? There could only be one reason. To find some way of incriminating him, rather than herself. Blackheart was a big enough prize to divert attention from the Summerses permanently. And this time, when the police came after him, they'd hold him a great deal longer than five hours.

Ferris quickly, methodically, began to tear the apartment apart. Nothing but clothes in his drawers and closets. Nothing but papers in his desk. She tried to take the time to see whether anything was incriminating, but panic was beating down around her like bat's wings and she couldn't concentrate.

"The kitchen," she murmured under her breath. "Check the kitchen. Lots of drawers. Maybe in the freezer."

Cabinets, drawers, refrigerator, oven—all were empty of anything remotely suspicious. The bags of recently purchased groceries were in a pile on the floor, the croissants and cannoli probably crushed, the Häagen-Dazs melting. The coffee had heated down to a thin layer of sludge in the bottom of the pot, and she reached over and turned it off, her mind still intent upon her search. There was a two-pound bag of coffee beans out on the counter. How odd that a coffee snob like Blackheart hadn't put the beans in the freezer with the other two-pound package. And why did he have two packages?

She upended the bag on the counter, and the small dark beans scattered over the butcher-block surface, raining over the floor like marbles. But it wasn't two pounds of beans. In the midst of the pile lay a plastic-wrapped package of tawdry silver and green. The Von Emmerling emeralds.

She had no choice. And no time to hesitate, to panic, to have second thoughts. Her course was clear, and she had to take it.

"Darling, what's wrong?" Regina responded to her breathless phone call. "You sound in an absolute panic."

"Regina, can you do me a huge favor? Can you somehow get Dale and Olivia to come over to your house? Right now?"

"They're not home, Ferris," Regina broke in.

"They're not?"

"Blackheart called me from the police station a while ago to tell me they were being brought in for questioning. I still can't believe—"

Ferris slammed down the phone. So it had already started to happen.

It was with a sinking sense of horror that she realized she'd have to traverse those rooftops once more. And to hope that she made it in time.

"DID YOU SEE the expression on her face?" Rupert demanded for the third time. "I thought she was going to have a fit."

"Very satisfying," Blackheart drawled in agreement. "What I can't figure out is why she looked so damned surprised. And why she'd moved them from her first hiding place. Hiding the emeralds under her underwear seemed just a bit too obvious for someone like Olivia."

The apartment was dark and silent when he opened the last lock. Where had she gone?

He flicked on the light, taking in the cushions still askew, the desk drawers left haphazardly open. "She didn't need to dump everything on the floor. Damn her." His voice was furious. "She didn't trust me," he said bitterly, flinging his tired body onto the sofa. "Get me a drink, will you, Rupert? Something strong."

Rupert paused, looking at his friend. "Okay," he said, vanishing into the kitchen just as Ferris opened the door.

She looked tired, Blackheart thought, feeling not an ounce of pity. She dumped his keys on the hall table and looked up.

He just sat there on the sofa, looking up at her with a cold, bleak expression. "Didn't they arrest Olivia?" she asked.

"They did. The charges against Trace and me were dropped."

"Then what's the problem?" Ferris demanded. "Everything's wonderful. Blackheart, I have to tell you what I did. I—"

"You don't have to tell me," he interrupted in a savage voice. "You searched my apartment. Couldn't quite trust me could you? Despite all those pretty words, when it came right down to it you had to make absolutely certain that I wasn't still a felon. Didn't you?"

"Didn't I what?" she asked very calmly.

"Didn't you search my apartment?"

"Yes," she said.

"And did you find what you were looking for?"

"Yes," she said again. She stood there for a long moment, not moving. "Goodbye, Blackheart."

He didn't turn his head until he heard the door shut quietly behind her. And then he began to swear, steadily, obscenely.

Rupert appeared from the kitchen, two dark drinks in his hand. "I do think I ought to mention something to you," Rupert said casually, handing him the drink. "Your kitchen is a mess. There are coffee beans all over the counter and the floor, and the bag that held them is ripped apart."

Blackheart just looked at him. "This is supposed to be edifying?"

"This was a bag of Colombian beans."

He'd finally gotten Blackheart's interest. "I don't like Colombian coffee."

"Exactly. The police noted one curious thing about the emeralds at Olivia's. There was a coffee bean wrapped up in the plastic wrap."

Dead silence filled the room as Blackheart looked at his friend in horrified comprehension. "I'm an idiot!" He slammed his drink down and was at the door two seconds later. There was no sign of her—she was long gone. He turned to look for his keys, and swore again. Sitting there on the hall table were his butchered lock picks and a shredded American Express card.

*

SHE'D condemned Blackheart without a hearing the moment the theft was discovered. It served her right to have the same lack of trust thrown back in her face.

The red shoes were sitting on top of her dresser. She slipped them on her feet, giving her reflection a wry grin. Powder-blue jockey shorts and red high heels. Too bad Blackheart wasn't here to enjoy it. Flopping down on the bed, she grabbed a pillow and tucked it underneath her as she flicked on the TV. Channel 12 was still running its series of caper movies, and *To Catch a Thief* was on.

"Francesca?"

She kept very still, her fingers still clutching the pillow beneath her. Maybe that low, warm voice was a fragment of her imagination. Slowly she

lifted her head, to look straight into Blackheart's tawny, rueful eyes.

"I really need someone to keep me in line."

"What sort of someone?"

"Well, I'd prefer another cat burglar. Someone who could climb rooftops with me if the need arose. Someone who could even do it by herself if she had to."

Ferris held her breath.

"Maybe she should be afraid of heights. That way she won't be into doing it at the drop of a hat."

"Sounds logical," she said softly. "Does she need anything else?"

"An American Express card. Mine got mysteriously shredded. I suffered a lot of losses today."

"Did you?"

He nodded, moving into the room with his usual catlike grace. "I lost my secretary to my assistant. It looks like they're going to make a match of it."

Ferris grinned. "That's wonderful."

"And my tools of the trade suffered considerable damage," he continued. "And I may have lost the woman I love. I'm sorry, Francesca."

She smiled, a tremulous, loving smile. "You haven't lost her," she said.

He still didn't cross the last few feet of space. "Trust is a funny thing," he said meditatively. "It's a gift that's given, it's something you earn, and yet it's so damned fragile. And without trust, love isn't worth a damn."

Ferris pulled herself into a sitting position, looking at him intently. "Blackheart," she said steadily, "I trust you with my heart and my soul and my life. If I find that I can't trust

you with other women's jewels, I'm just going to have to accept the fact that I'll be spending a lot of time returning them when you're not looking. At least I'm not without experience."

His mouth met hers in an open, searing kiss.

"I suppose it's only fair to tell you," he murmured against her cloud of hair. "I think I've broken into enough places in my misspent life," he drawled. His lips brushed her damp forehead. "I don't suppose there's any chance of your making a similar sacrifice?"

"Hell, no," she replied lazily. "I intend to keep on breaking into places, Blackheart."

"If you marry me and change your name, you won't be able to call me Blackheart in that deliciously scathing voice of yours. Not when you share the same name."

She grinned up at him. "Of course I can. You don't think I'd settle for anything as tame as Patrick, do you?"

His mouth dropped onto hers, his tongue tracing the soft contours of her lips.

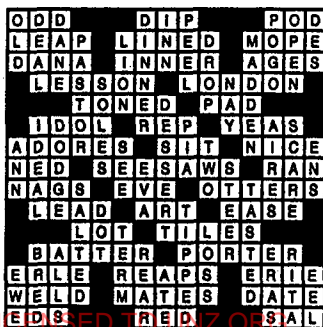
"We're coming to the best part of the movie," she murmured limpidly. "And I want to see how Cary Grant manages those rooftops. Professional curiosity, you know. Just because you're giving up a life of crime doesn't mean that I intend to follow suit." Rolling away from him, she grabbed the remote control and turned up the sound.

A moment later the little box was wrenched gently from her hand, the television went blank, and the room was plunged into darkness. "I'll tell you all about it," he drawled. "If you come here."

"Well, it's a tough choice," she said on a low note of laughter. "But I guess they'll rerun the movie."



Solution to
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MARIE FERRARELLA

Through Laughter and Tears



When Jake Benedict entered her life, comedienne Samantha Madison's career flourished...and so did their relationship until the night she decided her manager was taking over her life too completely.



The applause surrounded her like a warm glove. The mad throbbing of her heart had stopped. The audience, at first a sea of people, had turned into individual smiling faces at small café tables.

They were still laughing at what she had said. She had made them laugh.

Samantha Madison felt whole, perhaps for the very first time in her life. Her smile was soft and diametrically opposed to the barbed routine she had just delivered.

At rest, Sam didn't look as if she had the makings of a comedienne—or like the survivor that she was. Her diminutive stature belied the strong, firm set of her chin and the determined glint in her green eyes. But she *was* a survivor, one who had a way of turning a phrase that made people laugh. It had brought her to this small, dimly lit stage tonight.

For the first time Sam looked to where the women from her office were sitting. They had been the ones to talk her into this. She had scoffed at the idea at first. Making one or two people laugh was one thing. Standing up in front of a crowd at the Den of Comedy Club was quite another, even if it was “Amateur Night.” But her co-workers had been persistent, and finally Sam had agreed. It was either that or let them think she was afraid. And Sam never showed her vulnerability. No one knew about the raw,

hurting side of Samantha Jones Madison—except Sylvia.

Sylvia had been the one to encourage her. She should have been here tonight, but Becky, Sam's daughter, had come down with a fever at the last minute, and Sylvia volunteered to take care of her, telling Sam she was going to win the competition.

She might at that, Sam thought. None of the other contestants had gotten this kind of response. In the midst of her exhilarating triumph, Sam picked out the face of a man sitting off to the right. She wished that there was a little more light available. The man, from what she could see, wasn't laughing. He was smiling thoughtfully. He appeared to be mesmerized by her. He had that kind of look on his face. And what a face. Wow!

She bowed to her audience, and was about to step back when the manager, Brian Saunders, came forward and took her hand, detaining her.

“Well, I guess there's no doubt about the winner, is there?” he asked the audience, then smiled at Sam.

In answer to his question the patrons of the small L.A. club applauded once again.

Brian turned his dark head toward Sam. “I guess that says it all, Miss Madison. You've won.”

Sam grinned. “Thank you,” she said.

Even those simple words were shot out staccato. Sam's outfit epitomized femininity. So did her face. But when she opened her mouth, she became a "streetwise, tough little cookie." That was what her ex-husband had called her. And that protective camouflage suited Sam just fine. It also seemed to suit the audience. They loved her. She hugged the thought to herself.

"Stop by my office," Brian said, "and we'll discuss the terms of your prize."

Sam nodded, still a little dazed. She made her exit and found her way to the tiny, dusty dressing room. The floorboards creaked dismally as she went to the vanity table. Eight bulbs surrounded the mirror; five of them worked. Sam rummaged through her purse. Well, at least no one had ripped off her car keys. And her wallet was still there. The single twenty-dollar bill she had brought with her was taped to the inside of her panty hose. Suspicion had become a way of life with her. She had learned that from her parents and Alan.

For a moment Sam looked at her image in the mirror. The metallic threads in her silver and blue halter dress seemed to catch the light and gleam, contrasting sharply with her dark tan. Waves of abundant hair fell against either side of her face.

"Not bad, Sammy," she commented, nodding at the mirror. "Old Mom and Dad couldn't call you the 'plain one' now, could they? Eat your heart out, Elaine," she said. "Your older sister just won a prize for being the best at something."

Her slacks and light green pullover were still slung over the dressing screen. She almost hated to take the sparkling dress off. In it, she felt like a woman who had known triumph.

"The triumph," she told herself sternly, "is inside of *you*, not in some dumb, glittering dress that cost too much."

Sam stepped out of the dress and replaced it lovingly on the hanger before she did anything else. She stood wearing only her panty hose, tiny bikini underpants and a wisp of a strapless bra.

The sound of a cough made her jump. "Who's there?" she demanded, peering around the side of the screen.

Standing almost directly in front of it was the thoughtfully smiling, blond man she had tried to get a better look at earlier. Now he was grinning from ear to ear, deep dimples in each cheek.

"What are you doing here?" she snapped.

"Taking in the view," he replied.

"What view?" she challenged.

"The best view I've seen for quite some time. You really shouldn't change in front of a mirror," he said simply, looking directly into it.

Sam's eyes grew wide, and she turned to look behind her. Sure enough, she was totally reflected in the mirror.

"Why, you Peeping Tom!" she cried angrily.

"Jake," he corrected amiably. "Peeping Jake. Actually, I'm not that, either. I'm a victim of delightful, opportune circumstance," he informed her, still grinning.

Sam was seething, embarrassment heightening her reaction. Angrily she reached to the left and tried to pull the screen around her. All she did was send it off balance. It fell, narrowly missing Jake, and with it came Sam. Jake managed to catch her quite neatly.

Before Sam knew what was happening, he had her in his arms and was kissing her. It was so light, so brief, that she might have wondered if it had happened at all if not for the way her body had responded to him. This man knew how to kiss.

Hold it, you're practically naked here! her brain registered in horror. As if she had suddenly been brought back to life, Sam pushed Jake away, crossing her arms before her in self-defense.

"You look even better in person than in the mirror," he told her.

"Get out of here!" Sam demanded. Who was this man? "I'll scream!" she threatened.

"If my eardrums are any judge, you already have." He shook his head. "But don't you want to know what I'm doing here?" he asked.

"I already know what you're doing here," Sam retorted, rushing into her clothes. "You're leering and getting a cheap thrill."

"Nothing cheap about what I just saw," he said. "Anyway, I knocked first."

"I didn't hear anyone knock," Sam said icily.

"That's because you were talking to someone," he said. "Where are they?" he looked around.

"I was talking to myself," Sam admitted.

Jake looked amused again. "Hmm. Talks to herself and tapes money in her panty hose. You're one interesting lady, Samantha Madison."

Her money! He had gotten her so flustered that she had forgotten to take out the twenty. "And you—what did you say your name was? Jake?" He nodded. "You are an exasperating, irritating man!"

"I get better as you get to know me." He smiled.

Sam pushed past him, intent on reaching the door. "I don't want to get to know you," she informed him flatly, though not oblivious to Jake's exceptional good looks.

Alert, mischievous, bright blue eyes sparkled at her from beneath a wayward lock of dark blond hair. The rest of his hair was styled and had a full, rich look. Jake sported a deep California tan that made the light hairs on his arms stand out. He had a sports jacket slung over one shoulder.

I suppose, she thought, if I were a guy and had wide shoulders, a muscular chest and slim hips, I wouldn't want to hide myself under a jacket either.

Now Jake barred her exit. His eyes danced; he was playing with her. "Don't be hasty," he urged. "You don't know what you're turning down yet."

Sam pushed aside a restless, nervous feeling that was budding within her and glared at Jake. "Will you get out of my way, or do I call the manager?"

"Brian?" he asked. "He's a friend of mine."

She doubted it. "Fine. Your friend asked me to see him in his office after the show..." and she unceremoniously pushed his arm away.

"Hey, you're a little toughie." He laughed.

She wasn't, but she wasn't about to let him know that. "I have to be," she snapped. "To get away from people like you!"

"You get many business managers running after you?" he asked. "I'm one. Jake Benedict," he told her, putting his hand out. Sam took it cautiously. "I see the name doesn't mean anything to you," he observed.

"No," she said, eyeing him warily.

"Don't read the trade papers much, do you?" he queried, still holding her hand.

She wished he wouldn't do that. "No, why should I?" Sam contested.

"Why, indeed?" he murmured.

"Because, love, you're going to be in them very soon—provided you hand yourself over to me."

"You'd be the last person I'd hand myself over to," she declared, yanking her hand away and heading down the hall. When she reached Brian's office she swung the door open without knocking, then slammed it shut—right in Jake's face.

"I've never seen a winner look so annoyed," Brian commented, surprised. He had been processing that evening's receipts and was startled by Sam bursting in.

"Maybe your other winners weren't hounded by a weirdo," Sam said. Despite her agitation, the word winner tickled her. "Do you know you've got a Peeping Tom here?" she asked.

The door opened, and she swung around. "Not Tom. I told you, the name's Jake." Jake strode in, and Sam moved closer to Brian, who was smiling warmly at the intruder.

Sam looked from one man to the other. "Then you do know him?" she asked Brian.

Brian laughed. "Unfortunately, yes. Didn't he introduce himself?"

"Yes," she admitted grudgingly. "Mr. Saunders, you said something about a prize?"

"Yes, it's me," Jake said, standing next to Brian so that Sam was facing him again. She ignored him.

"Would you rather he left?" Brian asked Sam kindly.

"Yes!" Sam breathed in relief.

Brian turned to his friend. "Jake, do you mind?"

"Yes," Jake answered, "but I can wait." He went to the door. "I'll be out front."

As Sam watched Jake leave, something very unusual happened to her. She felt a momentary urge to stop him. Then she put him out of her mind.

"You were going to give me the prize money," she prompted.

Brian smiled. "Here's the check," he said. "Twenty-five dollars. Not exactly a king's ransom. The real prize," he went on, "is exposure. You can come back here every night for a week and do your monologue as the opening act for Chips Weaver," he said.

Chips was the club's headline act six days a week. Once he had worked in films and in first-rate clubs around the country. Everyone knew, though, that he was on his way down. Was she on her way up, playing the same club? she

wondered. She had a steady job and a steady paycheck. Becky's welfare depended on Sam holding on to both.

"I can see you're thinking about it," Brian observed. "I realize this isn't exactly Las Vegas, but..."

"Oh, no," Sam said, touching his arm. "It's just that I hadn't really thought about... performing..."

"What was tonight?" Brian asked.

"A dare," she admitted.

Brian smiled. "I understand. Still, I'd like to see you come back. You've got a natural gift. Making people laugh isn't easy," he told her.

"I've had a lot of practice," Sam replied, speaking half to herself. Laughter had always been her defense. Still, she hesitated. Then, what the hell? It wouldn't interfere with her work, and why shouldn't she enjoy a little stardust? "All right, Mr. Saunders, I'll do it. What time do you want me here?"

"Six-thirty tomorrow night. And the name is Brian."

Sam smiled. "Okay, I'll be here," she promised, her eyes shining. She turned toward the door.

"Hey, wait," Brian called. "You must sign your contract for the week. You want to get paid, don't you?" he asked.

Sam stared at him. "You mean I'm going to get *paid* for this?"

Brian had to restrain himself from laughing. "Yes," he said.

Sam found herself grinning like an idiot as she walked from the corridor into the dining area. Her eyes were adjusting to the dimness after being in Brian's well-lit office. Suddenly, Sam spotted Jake Benedict sitting at the

same table as before. His head was turned away from her now, but if he saw her, she'd never get away. Quickly Sam looked around for another way out. There had to be a back way.

She was annoyed with herself for her reaction to the man. What was she afraid of? She told herself that she didn't have time to waste trading words with him, yet for some reason her heart was thumping hard as she made her escape out the back door and into her car.

*

SAM TIPTOED into the tiny two-bedroom apartment. Both Becky and Sylvia were asleep on the couch, Becky in her pajamas, Sylvia with her bare feet propped up on the coffee table. One arm was wrapped protectively around Becky, gathering the little girl against her side. A blanket lay bunched up on the floor. A talk-show host was cracking jokes for no one's benefit on the TV. Sam walked over, shut off the TV and surveyed the scene. It was late. She *really* should let them sleep....

"Well, the star is home!" she announced.

Sylvia opened her eyes, bolting upright. "What? What is it?" she cried. "Oh, Sam," she said. "Sam! How was it?"

Next to her, Becky stirred. "Is it morning yet?" she wanted to know. "I'm too sick to go to school, Mommy," said the muffled little voice.

"Then you can stay home and celebrate with me," Sam proclaimed, bouncing down next to Becky, who threw her arms around her mother's

neck. "Were you the best, Mommy? Were you?"

"You bet I was!" Sam laughed.

"Oh, Sam, that's wonderful!" Sylvia exclaimed. "I knew you could do it."

Sam shrugged carelessly. "Piece of cake... Well," she admitted, as Sylvia eyed her good-naturedly, "maybe sliver of cake. God, I was so nervous," she confided. "You have no idea what it feels like up there. It's such a high—"

"What's a high, Mommy?" Becky wanted to know.

"Umm, we'll talk about that in ten years, okay, Shortstuff?" Sam promised.

"C'mon, Sam, give me details," Sylvia pleaded.

"What details?" Sam asked. "They fell at my feet. Only annoying thing was the guy who walked into my dressing room and gave me some line about making me a star."

Sylvia looked interested. "What did he look like?"

Sam sighed. "Blond with biceps," she told her friend.

"Doesn't sound like much of a description," Sylvia commented.

"You had to be there," Sam assured her.

She looked at her friend fondly, seeing more than the coarse, short black hair and the wide grin set in a face that was open and genuine and just a shade above plain. All Sam saw was the warm, affectionate person who had been her friend ever since her first day at Icon Insurance, when Sam was still smarting from her divorce, and frightened about the future.

Maybe, Sam thought, if she had known Sylvia when she was growing up, she wouldn't have had the underlying insecurity that had taken root and flourished because neither of her parents had wanted her after their divorce.

It had been over twenty years ago, but it still hurt. Her parents, too young for a commitment and far too young to raise a child, had realized their mistake and gone their separate ways, unencumbered. Sam had been shipped from one relative to another until her mother's Aunt Julia had taken her in. It was a home, although devoid of affection.

There she had stayed until her parents rekindled their feelings for one another and remarried. Elaine had been born shortly thereafter. Beautiful, sunny Elaine. And then, out of some sense of guilt, they had taken Sam back. But she never fit in.

A chill ran through Sam. Why was she delving into these self-destructive thoughts now? It was all over. She had something exciting and happy to cling to. She strove to recapture her elation.

"I'll put on the whole show for you right now," she said enthusiastically. She rose and stood in front of her precious audience. She got exactly one joke out when there was a knock on the door. Sam exchanged looks with Sylvia. It was after eleven o'clock. The knocking persisted.

"Who is it?" Sam called out finally, walking over to the door. It had a triple lock.

"Jake Benedict."

She was so furious at that she flipped open all three locks and threw

the door open. "What do you mean by following me?" she demanded.

"I didn't follow you," he told her, smiling easily. "I asked Brian for your address. Follow means having someone in sight *to* follow."

"It means, hotshot, to come after, and you are coming after me—not to mention *on* to me—"

"How'm I doing?" he asked brashly.

"Horribly!" Sam snapped.

"Thank you," Jake said, coming inside.

Sam glared at him, hands on hips. How was she going to get rid of this man? The look on Sylvia's face, she noted, asked why she would want to.

"Hello," Jake said, coming over to Sylvia and Becky. "I'm Jake Benedict."

Becky smiled at him uncertainly, but Sylvia gaped. "You are?" she asked in awe.

Sam was perplexed. "You know him?"

Sylvia devoured every movie magazine. "He's Felicia Addams's manager. He made her a star..." she breathed.

"One of your facts is a little off. I'm her ex-manager," Jake clarified. "But yes, I did make her a star. As I did with several other very talented women. As I will do with you," he told Sam.

Sylvia looked dazed. "Sam?" she asked. Her Sam?

"Mommy's going to be a star?" Becky chimed in.

Sam grew more annoyed. It was obvious to her that Jake was feeding them all a line, and she wasn't about to have him dazzle her daughter or her friend.

"You bet Mommy's going to be a star," Jake told Becky. "If she sits down to listen to me."

"I'll get Becky to bed," Sylvia offered. "You two can talk."

"I don't want to talk," Sam insisted.

"Fine," Jake said. "Then listen. I like my women quiet."

Sylvia laughed as she carried Becky to her room. "Boy, have you got a wrong number," she told Jake.

"I am *not* one of your women," Sam fairly yelled.

"Sit," Jake said, patting the place next to him on the sofa.

Sam stood her ground.

"Sit!" he ordered, his inflection firmer. He was used to temperamental females. He had shaped and molded several very lucrative careers in his ten years in the business. Unfortunately, Jake had been so busy with that, he had neglected to watch out for himself, and found himself suddenly "dumped," first by Felicia Addams, then by Adriana Simpson. He had failed to take precautions against their becoming too full of themselves.

The challenge with Sam, he realized, would start with convincing this raw talent that she had the makings for a good career.

Sam sat down on one arm of the sofa, perched like a bird about to take flight.

"Come closer," Jake told her. "I'm not going to pounce on you. Just hear me out."

Sam slid closer to him. The cushion moved under her weight, and she wound up sliding into Jake, who took full advantage and put his arm around

her shoulders as if it were all quite natural.

Sam stiffened. She reached over with her left hand to remove his arm and wound up with her hand in his, her arm crossed over her chest. A flurry of hot excitement nipped at her. She was very aware that his wrist now lay directly against her breast. And her breasts, damn them, were tingling. Even now she felt her nipples peaking and hardening at his touch. She knew he was aware of at least some of this because his grin deepened, accentuating his boyish dimples.

"Much better," he pronounced, and gently ran his left index finger along her chin. Crooking his finger, he raised her head slightly.

Sam's heart was thumping madly against her chest, and then she caught herself and pulled back. "What do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

He paused. "It's called a kiss," Jake said.

Sam threw his arm off her shoulders and attempted to stand. She failed, betrayed once again by the cushion, and suddenly found herself tumbling onto his lap.

"Why, Miss Madison, this is so sudden," Jake said.

Sam finally scrambled to her feet. Her look was icy. "I know what it's called," she said, referring to his comment about the kiss. "And I know what you're called."

Jake sighed, wondering if all this was worth it. Yes, he told himself. His instincts hadn't been wrong yet. "I," he told her patiently, "am Jake. Or 'Jake darling.' Or 'Oh, Jake.' Or," he continued with a wink that Sam found

terribly sexy in spite of herself, "'Mr. Terrific.' But," he went on as he rose, still facing her, "the first step," and he took a very firm grip on her shoulders, "is to get you to listen to me."

"Why should I?" she demanded.

"You like money?" Jake asked.

"Sure," she answered. What was he up to?

"Well, at least that much about you is normal," he commented. "I can help you earn it."

"Just like that," she said. "Stardom at my feet."

"No," he replied mildly, "not just like that. It's going to take work, dedication and a whole lot of boring details. But you've already got the first necessary ingredient. That extra something."

What a con man! "Very specific," Sam mocked.

She felt his fingers tighten. "No, it isn't. It's indefinable. But it sets you apart, and it's something the audience can see right away. It's going to help make you a star. That—and me."

"Why you?" she demanded.

"I'm fresh out of stars," he told her honestly. "But given the right material, I do good work."

"And I'm good material," she said.

"From what I can see," he said dryly, "you're not quite silk, but you'll do, love, you'll do."

His mouth was lowering to hers again. This time he wasn't going to be put off. His lips met their target. So did his kiss. It laced its way down through her soul, finding that part of her that craved acceptance. Could this devastatingly attractive man really help her to be someone? Sam struggled to keep

her emotions under control as she felt Jake's hands slipping from her shoulders and coming around to her sides. The tender sides of her breasts quivered. *Oh, no, you don't*, she thought, and she broke free.

Sam drew herself up to her full five-foot-two stature. "Very pretty speech, Mr. Benedict," she said, "but it won't get you a place to sleep tonight."

"I already have a place to sleep," he informed her. "I also have an office," he said, pulling out his card. "It's attached to this telephone. Don't be afraid to use it."

Sam lifted her chin. "I'm not afraid to use it," she retorted. "I'm just not an idiot, that's all."

"I don't handle idiots," he told her.

"BUT YOU CAN'T go in there!" the tall, gray-clad secretary protested, her owlish eyes opened wide in alarm.

"The hell I can't!" Sam thundered, marching past her.

Jane Carstairs was used to strange people trying to barge into her boss's office, hoping Jake Benedict could help them secure a piece of stardust. But they were always anxious to please. They didn't storm in yelling like this woman.

Sam's anger seemed out of place in the tastefully furnished, wood-paneled office she burst into. Jake looked up from his desk, holding a telephone receiver in midair.

"Mr. Benedict—" Jane cried helplessly, but Jake waved away her explanation with a comprehending nod. "I expected you today," he admitted, looking at Sam. "But not quite like this."

She hadn't expected to come "quite like this." Her bombastic entrance was due to George Shelby and his assistant, Gary Spano, her boss. Her ex-boss by some forty-five minutes. She had asked him for a short leave of absence, and he would have said yes had there been an ounce of backbone in his large, tubular body. But he had gone to clear it with Shelby, who had said, "no," so Mr. Spano had stammered out "no" to her as he avoided her eyes.

Sam had been, by turns, stunned, disappointed, then angry. She had worked hard for five years, missed exactly two days in that entire time. She wasn't asking for a leave with pay, just an assurance that her job would be there when she came back. As she had marched up the carpeted hallway into Shelby's spacious office, she wasn't sure just what possessed her. The idea of a leave had hit her as she was driving to work. Maybe she did have it in her to be a real success at something, to escape the drudgery that yawned before her. She'd give it a go. She'd get a leave, then go to Jake's office and present herself to him that afternoon.

But Shelby had looked annoyed that someone so lowly would think of bothering him. Asking him to reconsider. Contesting his decision. She was upset. She was replaceable. She was fired.

Fired. Another rejection. Unable to bear the burden of responsibility for what had transpired, Sam shifted it on to Jake. She had turned her car into the midtown traffic with fire burning in her green eyes.

And that was the way he saw her now.

"Do you know what I did today?" Sam demanded.

Jake motioned for Jane to leave. "I'm afraid to hazard a guess." The words were said kindly as he detected Sam's anguish.

His tone doused some of her fire. "I asked for a leave of absence," she told him. Her large eyes shimmered with angry tears, but she refused to shed them. "I believed you when you said I could be a success, and I asked for a leave of absence."

"And you got fired?" Jake guessed, pushing a soft, crushed-leather chair behind her. She crumpled into it, her body becoming as shapeless as the cowl-neck dress she wore.

"Yes," she hissed, "I got fired. How did you know?"

The easy smile returned to his lips as he went to a discreet-looking bar against the left wall. He mixed orange juice with a light touch of vodka. Screwdrivers suited her, he judged. "I have a gift," he remarked. "Here." Jake presented Sam with the glass, and she curled her fingers around it.

"I wasn't looking to get fired," Sam retorted.

"Want to talk about it?" Jake asked, drawing up a chair. "Might do you good."

"Talk is what got me into trouble in the first place," she admitted ruefully, taking a long sip of her drink. Sam coughed. "This isn't orange juice," she declared.

"Part of it is."

Sam put the drink down on his desk. "Look, if you're thinking of—"

"Getting you drunk?" he finished. "The drink is to help you relax, not to

render you submissive. I doubt that anything could do that," he said glibly. A twinkle played in his eyes. "Besides, I don't think I'd like you quite so much if you were." It took Sam a moment to digest that statement. By then, Jake was speaking into his intercom. "Jane, I want you to hold all calls. I think I'm going to be busy for a while." His eyes met Sam's over the rim of her glass. "Maybe for a long while."

Sam swallowed, wishing that when he turned those clear-water blue eyes on her, she didn't feel as if she were drowning in them.

"I like my men shorter," Sam said suddenly, hoping to put him off if he were harboring any romantic ideas.

"I like my women quieter," he countered.

"So we have an understanding?" she asked.

"Love, we don't even have a contract yet," he said, sitting down at his desk and opening a drawer.

Sam took another drink. "I wish you'd stop calling me love. I'm not your love," she said firmly.

"Not yet," he murmured, extracting a long document.

The screwdriver was beginning to make Sam warm and very receptive to Jake's smile. She liked his smile. She liked him. He was the only man she had ever met who wasn't put off by her sense of humor; he gave as good as he got. But could she trust him?

"Here." Jake placed the document in front of her. He handed her a pen. "Sign this," he told her. "It's our contract."

She spotted her name swimming somewhere on the page. "You were awfully sure of me, weren't you?" she asked.

"Let's just say hopeful. You can take it to your lawyer if you'd like," he offered.

The fact that he wasn't urging her to sign and skip the fine print put her more at ease. "I don't have a lawyer. Even my divorce was one of those do-it-yourself things," she admitted.

Her words pleased him. "Then you're not married."

"That's what divorced usually means," she said, striving to sound flippant. It wasn't easy. She found her barriers slipping every time she looked up into his eyes.

"Seeing anyone?" Jake pressed.

"Pink elephants, in a minute," she muttered.

"Lunch will remedy that," he assured her. "Are you going to sign that now?"

Sam pretended to look the contract over. She wondered how the English language could be made to sound so confusing. "Am I selling myself into slavery?"

Jake leaned against his desk, crossing his arms. "In a manner of speaking," he conceded. "It says, in a nutshell, that I am to be your manager, and that I get fifteen percent of everything you make in return for handling you."

"Define handling," she said warily.

The grin grew wider. "Marketing you. Making you a very desirable commodity in the entertainment world." Slowly he circled her, placing his hands on her very tense shoulders

and kneading them ever so slightly. "Whatever else you think handling means doesn't enter into a formal contract as far as I'm concerned."

The pressure of his fingers felt good as he loosened the knots in her shoulders. But the total effect of his touching did everything but cause her to relax.

"I'm not interested in anything else," she said flatly. "I need a career. Something stable to give Becky. I don't need complications."

"Neither do I," he assured her.

They were both lying, and both sensed it.

"That contract gives me exclusive rights to handling you for five years. If you want out, you'll have to buy your way out."

"Five years?" she echoed. "That is slavery."

"You're going to have to trust me," Jake told her. "Otherwise this won't work at all."

Trust was a luxury she could ill afford. But right now she had no other choice. She was a twenty-five-year-old divorcee with no job, an apartment furnished by a tasteless landlord who was raising the rent next month and a child who depended on her for everything.

Slowly Sam signed her name to the contract.

"YOU'RE FROWNING," Sam said. "Why?" The people at the club hadn't frowned. They had laughed. Just like last night's audience. Sam had come to life beneath the sunshine of their approval. But now, as she looked at Jake madly scribbling notes, she was ut-

terly devoid of sunshine or confidence.

"Answer me," she insisted, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm not frowning," he said, motioning for her to join him at the small table.

Brian was just announcing the headline act, but all Sam was aware of was Jake's pile of notes. "Why are you taking so many notes?" she asked him.

"Because you," he said, touching the tip of her nose, "are a diamond in the rough. It's my job to refine you. Now, relax and watch the show."

"I can't relax," she muttered.

Jake smiled. "I know how I can get you to relax."

Sam's eyes shifted from the comedian to Jake. A warm sexuality fairly flowed from him. The hairs on the back of her neck felt charged by electricity. "I'll watch the show," she said docilely.

She could hear him chuckling.

"You were terrific."

Sam turned, beaming at the whispered words as Brian took the last chair and joined them at the table. She jerked her head at Jake. "He doesn't seem to think so. He's written several pounds of notes saying how bad I am. The original draft for *War and Peace* was shorter."

"Forget about him. I say you were great." He took her hands in his, and Sam warmed to his praise.

Jake raised an eyebrow. "I didn't say she wasn't great—"

"Then why all this?" Sam gestured at Jake's pad.

"Everything can be improved on, love. Remember that. You don't want to play dives like this forever, do you?"

"I think I'm being insulted." Brian laughed, taking no offense. He knew that his club might be a good starting point—or a point to which an aging comedian might return—but it wasn't an "in" place for a talented performer whose star was on the rise.

"No insult intended," Jake assured him. "But Sam's going to play the Palace some day."

"Buckingham?" she asked, far from convinced.

"Actually, I was thinking more of Caesar's to start."

Sam's eyes grew wide. "To start with? When he dreams, he dreams big, doesn't he?" she asked Brian.

"And he's rarely wrong," Brian assured her. "I'll leave you two to your plotting," he said, getting up. "I think my star performer is going to need a little reassuring. His act is falling rather flat tonight, especially after yours," he told Sam with a warm smile.

*

THE TALL, thin, older woman looked haughtily pleased with the outfits the models were displaying at the private showing.

A daring, skintight yellow jumpsuit caught Sam's eye. It was slashed to the waist and gorgeous, but hardly the thing for a comedienne. It was more suited to a sexy singer.

"We'll take it," she heard Jake say.

Sam turned to him. "I don't think—" she began.

"You're not supposed to," he said. "That's what you pay me to do."

Sam pressed her lips together. "That thing must cost a fortune," she protested. "I can't afford—"

"I'm paying for your costumes," he told her. "It's part of the deal." He put his hand over hers. It was a warm, protective gesture, but Sam found herself balking at it. Having someone take charge of things was going to take some getting used to.

They wound up buying six gowns. Sam glanced down at the four-figure number on Jake's check as he handed it to the beaming salon owner. "You've just paid this month's rent on the place," Sam whispered to him. It was against her nature to spend that much money on clothes.

"You're going to have to broaden your horizons, love," Jake told her. "Have them delivered to this address." He handed the other woman his card.

Sam felt him curl his fingers around her hand. It felt nice.

"Now, on to your face," he said as they left the salon.

Sam stopped walking, pulling her arm free. "What's wrong with my face?" she demanded.

Patently Jake took hold of her hand again. "There's nothing wrong with your face," he assured her as he ushered her into his chauffeured car.

"Next stop, Fred," Jake instructed before closing the smoked-glass partition and leaning back beside Sam.

Then he took her face in his hands and looked down into her eyes. She stayed frozen in place as he kissed her softly, making everything go crazy inside. Sam dug her fingers into the leather upholstery. She'd be damned if

she was going to be seduced in the back seat of a limo in downtown L.A.—at least not during daylight hours. And yet when the kiss ended she was disappointed.

"It's a beautiful face," Jake said, "but your makeup doesn't do it justice."

Sam pulled away. She had worked hard at getting her "look." "I thought my makeup was just fine," she informed him, her defenses up in order to hide the hurt.

"It is," Jake agreed. "For everyday. But not for the stage. I'm taking you to Andre. He'll know what to do."

ANDRE TURNED out to be another thin citizen of Jake's world of illusions. But Sam liked Andre. Unlike the salon owner, he was warm. He smiled broadly, took Sam's hands in his and spread her arms wide, although all he looked at was her face.

"Can we have a private booth?" Jake asked.

"Wouldn't have it any other way. I like silence when I'm creating," Andre said, leading Sam toward a door in the rear.

"And just what is it you're creating?" Sam asked.

"A more beautiful you," he promised.

That meant there was something beautiful to work with, right? Sam tried to take heart from the words.

It took two hours. When Andre was finished, Sam stared into the mirror. The face looking back at her belonged to some exotic person.

"No, not quite right," Jake announced.

Andre tried again. This time he hit just the right combination of worldliness and innocence to please both Jake and Sam. Then he prepared a set of stage makeup for her and one for everyday use. But when she saw him approaching a bowl of freshly crushed avocado paste, Sam drew the line.

"Oh, no," she cried, "no one's making a salad dressing out of my face!"

"It's to tighten your pores," Andre told her.

"Skip it this time," Jake said. "Let's get to the haircut."

"I don't want my hair cut," Sam protested.

"Fine," Jake muttered. "Listen, I want it cut so she can shake her head in any direction and still look good. I think the layered look—"

"Jake!" Sam cried, putting her hands up over her hair.

"Look, Sam," he said, "trust me on this, okay?"

SAM HAD TO admit that it wasn't bad. Not bad at all. She handed the small mirror back to Andre after intently examining herself from all angles. It was an improvement.

Sam looked toward Jake and saw the approval she craved. "Where to now?" she asked.

"One more stop," he told her, and led her out of the beauty parlor. Behind them, Andre was already turning his attention to another client.

"Well," Sam said, "you've redone my face, my hair and my wardrobe—hold it!" she cried. "You're not going to have my material reworked!"

Jake opened the car door for her. "No, the material stays. I just want you to soften it a little. You're too angry."

"I am not," she protested.

Jake's knowing look said that he thought otherwise.

Several minutes later the limousine pulled up in front of an exclusive health salon.

"Now what?" she groaned.

"Now, love," Jake said, "you start your aerobics class. I want you supple and agile," he told her.

"Why?" Sam wanted to know. "Do you expect the audience to chase me?"

Jake laughed, shaking his head as they approached a shapely receptionist, who was on the phone. "Why can't you accept anything without being so defensive all the time?" he asked, soon propelling a grudging Sam on her way to the locker room.

Forty-five minutes later Sam sat, still panting, in Jake's car. The quick shower she had taken had done nothing to restore her vitality.

"A couple of weeks of this and I'll be dead." With a supreme effort Sam pulled her body upright. "I thought whipping someone into shape was just an expression. Why are you trying to kill me?"

"The word is shape, not kill. In order to promote you. We're promoting a total package—all of you, not just your material. It's a hard world out there." The look in his eyes told her that he would protect her from it.

"So I've noticed," Sam said with a sigh, collapsing back into the seat.

Jake grinned at her. "Time for a quick bite to eat, and then on to the club," he said.

Sam perked up at that. She perked down when she saw what Jake ordered for her at the restaurant. "Condemned men get more than this," she complained, staring down at the diet special, cottage cheese on a large lettuce leaf flanked by several tired peach slices.

"Condemned men have no future. You do. Now eat."

Sam wolfed it down. And then it was on to the club.

THAT DAY SET the pace for the week that followed. Jake was with her constantly, molding her, working with her, filling up her time with his words and himself. It was a love-hate situation for Sam. She found herself balking at his restraints and commands, yet looking forward to being with him. It totally confused her.

In the six days he had spent with her, Jake had somehow grown to know her inner workings better than anyone else ever had, with the possible exception of Sylvia, who had worked at it for years. Did he also know how she was beginning to feel about him? And if he did, how would he react? She was afraid to learn the answer.

"So, how was I tonight, oh, fearless leader?" Sam asked, sitting down beside him at the table. Was it her imagination, or had the crowd at the club gotten bigger?

"Better," he answered, jotting last-minute notes.

"Still not satisfied?" she asked, disheartened.

"Almost," he muttered.

Sam sighed, then sipped her diet soda. Well, this was her last night, she thought. Where did they go from here?

As if to answer her thoughts, Brian came up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. "The audience loved you," he said, and the words filled her soul. He sat down next to her. "I've got a contract in my office all ready for you," he said. "How about a three-week engagement with *your* name on the marquee?"

Sam opened her mouth, but Jake beat her to it. "She'll take it," he said casually. "But I have to look over the terms. And it can only be for *two* weeks."

This was her life, wasn't it? "Why two?" she asked.

"Because starting in two weeks I have you booked at the Oak Room at the Chandler Hotel."

Sam tried not to stutter. Someone had hired her? "But how? When?"

"Albert Savoy caught your act last night. He manages the Oak Room."

"This calls for a celebration," Brian said, signaling to a waiter.

The celebration went on for some time, with Sam trading in her diet soda for a glass of champagne. Among the three of them, a bottle disappeared. Sam didn't remember what she ate, or if she did. There was a warm glow in the pit of her stomach. Life was wonderful. Jake was... wonderful. She looked at him now, as they sat in his limousine on their way to her place. In her rosy state Sam allowed herself to curl up next to him.

Sam turned her attention to the back of the chauffeur's head. "Doesn't Fred ever get to go home?" she asked.

"Fred lives with me," Jake told her. "I bought him as a child from some gypsies. He's mine to do with as I wish."

It was a dumb remark, but Sam couldn't stop laughing.

"If I'm that good, maybe I should promote *me* as well as you," Jake said to her fondly. He placed his fingers gently along the outline of her throat, tilting her head back ever so slightly and laying claim to her lips. There was no hesitation on Sam's part. An overpowering emotion seized her as she realized that she had wanted him to kiss her all night. All week.

"Wow," Jake murmured against the hollow of her throat. "Maybe we can incorporate that into the act. It'd be a real showstopper."

She stiffened. The act. Was that all he could think of at a time like this? Was that all she was to him? A way to make money? She felt tears forming behind her eyes, but before she could voice any protests, he was kissing her again.

Sam struggled hard to pull herself out of the depths of Jake's kiss. "We're here," she announced weakly, finally realizing that they had stopped.

"Not yet," Jake murmured. It was clear to Sam that he was definitely not talking about her apartment.

"We're as 'here' as we're going to get," she told him. "I think I'd better go in," she said after a beat.

"Better for whom?" Jake asked, softly touching her hair, then letting his hand glide down to the center of her

breastbone. With light fingers he traced the path formed by the deep V of her neckline.

Sam drew in her breath sharply. "For everyone," she replied, opening the door next to her. Jake pulled her back.

"Didn't anyone ever teach you not to get out on the street side?" Jake chided.

"There's no traffic," she pointed out.

"You never know when a car can come tearing along." He held on to her hand, and she found herself wanting never to let go. "C'mon, why don't you invite me up for a nightcap?"

"I've only got diet ginger ale," she told him.

He shrugged. "My favorite nightcap. Doesn't dull the senses." His voice was sultry, inviting.

Nothing dull about her senses either, Sam thought. Now Jake was out of the car and leading the way. Sam sighed and followed. The apartment was totally dark.

"Where's your welcoming committee?" he asked.

"Sylvia took Becky out to dinner and then back to her place for the night," she said. "Becky likes sleeping over at other people's houses..."

"So do I," Jake murmured against Sam's hair as he stood behind her.

The light switch? Where was the light switch? Sam spread her fingers out along the wall. Why couldn't she find it? She felt Jake lacing his fingers through hers, stopping her search.

"Calm down," he said. "You're much too tense. I have an idea."

"I just bet you do," she said.

"Why don't I give you a demonstration?" The statement came along with a string of kisses on her trembling throat.

"I...don't...think..." She was melting against him. Even as she protested, she felt her body drawn to his, and a deep-seated need to be loved by this man.

"Shh. I told you, you're paying me to do the thinking for you." Jake was kissing the point of her left shoulder, and as his lips moved along her skin, the strap fell away, and his mouth moved lower. Sam felt her stomach muscles begin to quiver, and she raised herself up on her toes, subconsciously encouraging him.

Suddenly she felt the warmth of his breath on her breast. She stifled a moan of protest as his tongue fluttered about the nipple, causing it to harden.

She was lost. And she didn't want to be.

"Jake, please," she begged.

She felt the movement of his long eyelashes against her skin. "I mean to please," he assured her.

Sam tried to move back, Jake caught her in his arms and held her against him. The smooth fabric of his shirt brushed against her exposed breast.

"What about Fred?" she asked desperately.

Jake's fingers were busy slipping down the other side of her dress. "Let him find his own woman."

"No," she protested. "I mean he can't stay out there all night."

"Your concern for others is touching," Jake murmured as he easily parted the zipper of her dress. "But

don't worry. He has orders to leave if I don't turn up in half an hour." His hands were on either side of her hips, gently guiding the dress down over her supple curves. It fell to the floor.

Sam swallowed. "Oh?" she asked. "Is that a standing rule?" She didn't want it to be. She wanted to be special.

"Nope." He cupped each full breast and kneaded the aching buds with his thumbs. "That's one I just made up for tonight."

"Oh, then I'm special?" she asked. Even in such a moment of pulsating desire, Sam could not believe that anyone would ever find her special, though she wanted that more than anything else in the world.

"If you don't already know that, I'll just have to show you." Sam trembled as he pressed his lips to hers, and she felt her desire mounting as the hard contours of his body left their impatient imprint.

Sam's head was spinning by the time the kiss ended. Jake picked her up in his arms. "Where's your bedroom?" he asked.

"To your left," she said. A sudden jolt roused her from paradise.

"Damn."

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"I just rapped my shin on the coffee table."

"I told you to put the lights on."

"The path to true love never runs smooth," he quipped.

"Huh!" she scoffed. "You don't want a meaningful relationship."

"Sure I do," he told her. "Tonight..." His voice faded away as he kissed her again.

Sam tried to free herself. "A one-night stand. Well—"

"One night," Jake told her, setting her down, "can be a lifetime in some cases. Time," he kissed her ear, "is a relative thing."

Sam's breath was coming in shallow snatches again. Why couldn't she just send him on his way? But she couldn't form the words. Not when his hands were working along her hips, slipping her panties down, leaving her utterly naked, utterly vulnerable.

"Do you always make love so formally?" she managed.

"Formally?" he asked. "If you don't like my attire," he told her, "you're welcome to remove it."

His tone was teasing and warm, but the playful glint in his eyes soon vanished as Sam went about her task. The buttons on his shirt were small and square and did not pass easily through the buttonholes.

"That's to foil any attempt at my virtue—unless I want it," he said. "And this time, I want it," he whispered.

The shirt parted, exposing his smooth, muscular chest. She could see his pectorals tighten ever so slightly as she slid the ivory-colored shirt down his arms. For a moment Jake pulled her to him, her breasts rubbing against his chest, tantalizing them both. Sam didn't think she could endure the yearnings, but she was forced to as Jake held her from him again.

"You're not through," he told her.

Sam took a deep breath, trying hard to show him that, along with passion, she was actually fighting a degree of

embarrassment. Lovemaking with Alan had never been anything like this.

It was as if her hands belonged to someone else as she undid his belt. And then she stopped.

"More," Jake whispered, his eyes coaxing her. He guided her hands to the zipper and pressed her fingers gently, making them travel downward. As her touch took in his anatomy Sam saw Jake suck in his breath and hold it for a moment. The look on his face was one of sheer desire. She didn't know what possessed her, but she pressed her fingers against him, ever so lightly exploring. And then his trousers fell away. Only one small article of clothing separated them from each other.

Gaining courage from her own actions, Sam slid her hands beneath the fabric, resting them on either side of his hips. She used her wrists to push his briefs away.

"You're beautiful," Jake whispered huskily, the words throbbing in his throat. He pushed her back against the bed and she felt the raised design of her white bedspread touch her buttocks. And then his hands; he molded her to him as he joined her on the bed.

Over and over again Jake kissed her. He devoured her with kisses, exciting her beyond her wildest dreams. Each part of her cried for the feel of his mouth, and he complied, his lips journeying lower to taste every part of her.

Sam could no more stifle the cry that came from her lips than she could have stopped the dawn from arriving as she tried to grab hold of the honeyed ecstasy that poured through her veins.

Even though the pleasure was exquisite, Sam tugged at Jake to come back up and join her. She wanted to feel his lips on hers, his body stretched fully against hers.

"Now I'm satisfied," he murmured.

"What?" she rasped.

"You asked me earlier if I was satisfied. At the club, remember? And I said not yet. Well, I am now... almost," he said, nibbling on her ear. And then his smile faded as he kissed her with the full heat of his desire.

In a moment of sheer euphoria, Sam admitted to herself that she had wanted Jake since the first time she had seen him. And she had wanted him to want her. Not just for a pleasant interlude, either.

Soon Sam couldn't even think, not that she wanted to...

KNOCKING. Someone was knocking at the apartment door. Sam awoke with a start. She didn't even have time to take in fully the magnificent body that met her eye in full daylight. The sound of a small voice signaled an impending catastrophe.

"Mommy, open up."

"Oh, no! That's Becky," Sam cried in panic.

Jake propped himself up. "As I recall, she lives here."

Sam looked at him in distress. "But she can't find us in bed together."

"She won't," Jake told her. "You're getting up to answer the door."

"Jake," Sam waived.

"Okay, okay." He laughed, swinging his long legs to the floor. "I'm al-

ready dressed. Get a move on before Becky files a missing mommy report."

Sam bounded out of bed, grabbed her bathrobe, and hurriedly slammed the bedroom door behind her.

"Oh," Sam said as she opened the front door, "you're early." She ran her hand through her wayward hair.

"Sam, it's ten o'clock," Sylvia said. "Sorry I had to knock, but I can't find my key. Hey, what's the matter with you? You look like you've just run the fifty-yard dash."

"Nothing, nothing," Sam said as the bathroom door opened and Jake came out, neatly dressed and looking as innocent as a newborn babe.

Sylvia grinned. "I should have that kind of nothing hanging around my apartment in the morning."

"Mommy, what's Mr. Jake doing here?" Becky asked.

For a minute Sam was at a loss for an answer.

"I'm here to take you and your mommy and your Aunt Sylvia to Disneyland," he lied smoothly. "Unless you have other plans for this afternoon and intend to break my heart."

Becky ate it up, and Jake got another notch closer to Sam's heart. Love me, love my child.

"Umm, listen," Sylvia said, "you don't have to take me along. I'll just let myself out—" But Jake grabbed her wrist.

"Nope. My agenda strictly calls for three lovely ladies," he said very firmly.

Just then the phone rang. Sam picked it up, surprised to hear Jake's answering service on the other end.

"It's for you," she said, perplexed.

Why would anyone be trying to reach him here?

Jake covered the receiver. "I told them I was going to be here," he told Sam, correctly reading her look.

"Pretty sure of yourself, weren't you?" she asked. Half of her was furious, but she wouldn't have given up the night they had just shared for anything.

He kissed her mouth quickly and with that, she went off to change.

By the time she came back out, Jake was through with his phone call. "Sit down, love," he told her.

Sam perched on the arm of the sofa. "Well, what is it?" she asked, looking down at Jake.

"You're going to be on 'The David Carrington Show.'"

"I'm what?" Sam's mouth dropped open.

Jake turned to Becky. "Has your mom had this hearing problem long?"

Sam fairly leaped off her perch and grabbed both of Jake's lapels. "I'm what?" she almost shrieked.

He hugged her. "That was what that all was about. The Carrington show had a last-minute cancellation. You're booked for next week."

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OFF TO Sam's left was a television monitor broadcasting the show in progress. She tried not to pay any attention to it, or to the fact that her fingertips were frozen. Sam turned to look at Jake in alarm.

"My hands. What do I do with my hands?" she asked.

Jake smiled and tried to put her at ease. "You could try doing what you did last night," he suggested.

Her feistiness returned. "The show isn't supposed to be X rated," she reminded him.

When it was Sam's turn, she rose on legs that didn't seem to belong to her. And then there was no time to wonder about anything. The camera was swinging her way. She scarcely heard David Carrington introducing her. She was on!

She was going to be great. She knew it as soon as she started her monologue. The immediate laughter from the audience calmed her nerves and spurred her on.

"My parents were very absent-minded people. They kept leaving my baby carriage in tow-away zones.... They'd move while I was at school and forget to tell me.... When busing came into being, they put me on a Greyhound...." The laughter warmed her, just as the incidents that inspired her routine had scarred her.

After her monologue there were only a few minutes left of the show. Carrington called her over, chitchatting with her. He told her that he was very impressed. He said it on the air. With millions of people watching, if she was to believe the ratings Jake had quoted. Wow!

When the show was over Carrington invited Sam and Jake to dinner and they talked business. He wanted Sam to come back half a dozen times in the next year.

"Your star, little lady," he said, "is definitely on the rise, and I want to get you signed up before your manager

here ups your asking price. Is it a deal?" he asked Jake.

Exposure on "The David Carrington Show" was like the kiss of life for a performer. "It's a deal," Jake said enthusiastically.

Sam was left to sip her drink and look on, glowing in the aftermath of triumph and wondering why there was something hollow about it all.

THERE WAS MORE good news the next morning. Sam had just returned from taking Becky to school and was laying out her outfit for that night, her last at Brian's club, when she heard someone pounding on her door.

It was Jake, who scooped her up in his arms and swung her around the room.

"A simple hello would have done." Sam laughed.

Jake kissed her hard on the mouth, totally disarming her. Then he took a slew of pink papers from his pocket and showered them onto her bed.

"What's this?" Sam demanded.

"Those, my naive little darling, are messages. The phone hasn't stopped ringing since this morning. All these people," he assured her, taking her hands in his and kissing each palm, "want you. I told you you were great."

Sam shrugged, trying to appear indifferent. "I knew that."

"Oh, you did, did you?" Jake laughed, taking her into his arms. "You, my love, are a walking inferiority complex."

"I am not!" she cried.

"Shh. Never argue with your manager. I know what's best for you."

"Oh?" she asked. "And what's best for me?"

"Me," he said, kissing a path along her throat to the top button of her blouse. He began to undo the buttons, kissing each new area that came into view.

Sam could feel herself succumbing as a delicious feeling of love and passion seized her. "I never argue with my manager," she said.

"Smart girl. Now you're learning," he murmured against her skin.

The morning melted away into the afternoon as Sam gave herself up to the feelings of love that played like a symphony within her.

SAM SAT pensively looking at Jake over her coffee cup. She should feel elated, she told herself, but part of her was scared.

"I don't know, Jake..." she said, her voice trailing off.

"There's nothing to think about, love. This is part of the territory," he told her, surprised at her reluctance. And then it hit him. "It's Becky, isn't it?"

Sam nodded. "I don't want to leave her behind."

Jake stood, then came up behind her, placing his hands on her shoulders. "Taking a little kid on the road with you isn't advisable."

He was right. He was always right, damn him. Why was it so complicated? "I don't want to leave her behind," she repeated. "Being left behind is a terrible thing..." Vivid memories came back to her. "You can stay with her while I'm on stage and then—"

Jake came around to face her, shaking his head. He sat down next to her. "What about school?"

"What's so hot about second grade? She can already print. I can tutor her. She's got her reading books. I can read a primer. That would be just my speed. What's the problem?"

"Don't put yourself down like that," he said. "I don't like it." His voice softened. "Two weeks and you'll be back. You want to play Brian's club forever?" he asked.

"Maybe," she shot back. Then, "No," she said in a small voice.

"Well, this is part of it. You have to go on to someplace important. You're damn lucky to have this opportunity," he reminded her. "Look, love, Becky goes to school until three, then on to day care until five. Sylvia can pick her up. They get along better than best friends do," he pointed out. "Look, love, most people don't have to be beaten over the head with stardom. They grab it. Go for it, love," he urged. "You might not get another chance."

"Go for it," she echoed, her voice etched with sadness.

"OH, BOY, Mommy, does that mean I get to stay up late until you come back?" Becky cried when Sam broke the news to her.

Sam looked at Sylvia. "Not exactly the puddle of tears I expected," she cracked. A flood of relief washed over her. She had already discussed the matter with Sylvia, who had voiced Jake's sentiments, trying to lay Sam's worries to rest.

"I'll take wonderful care of her," Sylvia promised.

"Don't be that great," Sam warned. "I want her to miss me a little."

"You know she will," Sylvia laughed. "She's just excited for you. We both are."

"SO THIS IS success," Sam said wryly.

She was standing in the doorway of their hotel room, looking around critically. "I didn't have to leave home for this."

Jake put down their suitcases. "Look, it's not my fault the other place lost our reservations," he said, referring to the luxury hotel they were supposed to be staying in, "or that they're booked solid for that Shriners convention. Tomorrow we'll get something else. Unless," he sighed, "you're up to traipsing around town now."

Sam shook her head, sinking onto the bed, which took up most of the room. "There isn't a single 'traipse' left in my legs. I just want to sleep for a week." They had been on the road for the better part of the day.

Jake stood over her, looking down at the tempting picture she made. "You'll miss your act if you do," he grinned.

"I'll phone it in," she promised. "Things are happening too fast, too soon—"

He had seen it before. People praying for success and then getting overwhelmed by it. "Don't worry," he said. "I'll be there to get you through," he promised, kissing her temple.

But he was missing the point, Sam thought. And then she gave up thinking altogether as his kisses spread to her forehead and down the bridge of her nose before his lips finally came to rest against her mouth. Sam pressed her mouth against his, craving solace, and now Jake's full weight was resting on her body. Suddenly their actions were interrupted by a strange movement beneath them.

"Is that you quivering with anticipation," Jake asked, sitting up, "or has our bed suddenly become possessed?" The bed was vibrating. It was one of those coin-operated ones found in so many second-class motels. And it was giving out free samples.

Sam leaped up and stared down at it.

"I think it's safe now," Jake said, nodding toward the bed as it came to an abrupt halt. "Probably had a little life left in it from the last occupant."

Jake took her back into his embrace and began kissing her, his intense desire transmitting itself to her. As her sense of reality began to fade away, so did the lights.

Sam said, "Jake, what kind of a place is this?"

"Probably didn't pay their electric bill," he murmured.

Then Sam felt his hands begin their slow passage over her body, undressing her. His touch was as gentle and sure as that of a master violinist who knew just how to make his violin sing.

Sam wanted to cry out. Each moment held both agony and ecstasy for her. Finally stripped of her blouse and jeans, she pressed her mouth against Jake's hungrily, savoring the sweet taste of his lips. He slid her bra straps

from her shoulders, and she lowered her arms obligingly, never once releasing her claim on his mouth. One more movement and she felt the bra loosen, then fall between them.

Her breasts ached for the touch of his hands, and she brought them up to meet her tingling flesh. The more Jake massaged them, the greater her desire grew. She arched her back and he took her cue, lowering his head to grace each nipple with a kiss.

"And now for the last hurdle." She could hear the smile in his voice as he rid her of her last article of clothing, sliding his palms against her buttocks in a gently massaging motion as his fingers reached lower and lower, taking her panties with them. Sam felt the soft sting of air against her flesh as Jake worked his hands forward, claiming everything for his own.

She had scarcely enough strength to stand as she waited, trembling, to have his hands find their journey's end. Jake returned one hand to her buttocks, kneading her, while he slid the other along her thigh, coming to the parting of her legs and reducing her to near-mindless desire with each sweep of his fingers.

She tugged at his half-opened shirt, wanting to feel his skin next to hers, wanting him to be as vulnerable as she was. She wanted to feel that he needed her as much as she needed him. She couldn't shake her insecurities. Sam tugged again, ripping one button free.

"I hope you know how to sew," Jake murmured as he began to undo the rest of his shirt.

Sam gave him no answer as she began to loosen his trousers. Only when

Jake stood in just his briefs did Sam slow her pace. The last part was one she had come to enjoy, and she went about it now with deliberation. If he could methodically remove her clothing, she could return the effort. Inch by inch, Sam slid first one side, then the other, down Jake's smooth, muscular hips. She could feel his mounting desire.

"You little vixen," he rasped tightly. "You learn well." He filled his hands with her hair, cupping his fingers about the back of her neck.

When he was unencumbered by clothing, too, Jake pulled her close, pressing her urgently against his hot flesh. She reveled in the glowing heat and the hard outline of his body. Once again Sam lay down on the bed, waiting for him. Her breath was dashed away by his kisses.

Once more the bed began to move under them.

"I think it feels left out," Sam decided.

"Forget about the bed. Just think about me," was the last thing she heard Jake say before he began whispering her name.

JAKE BOOKED them into a plush hotel by noon the next day. After that he turned all his attention to Sam's act and became totally businesslike. Sam wouldn't have minded except for her mounting doubts. She couldn't shake the feeling that when Jake stood there, dictating to her, he saw only the performer he was fashioning.

You're being stupid and ungrateful, she told herself as she sat in their Las Vegas hotel room waiting for Jake to

return from yet another business meeting. "He's doing it all for us," she insisted to herself.

But was he? Was he doing it all for them—or for himself? She knew what fifteen percent of her meant in dollars and cents—or she would have, if he would only tell her exactly how much she was making.

"Me manager, you funny lady," he had quipped the last time she had asked. "You just make them laugh." Like some windup toy, she had caught herself thinking.

Only when she was on stage did Sam come to life, feeding on her audiences' applause. Up there she was in charge. She could feel it. Even Jake had begun to look fully satisfied with her performances. She was good. She was dynamite.

The word made her smile. That was what the local reviewer had called her act. Dynamite.

But what happened after the explosion? Would she fizzle? Would her career be over as quickly as it had begun? And would Jake move on if she didn't become the big star he thought she was going to be? Exactly where did she stand with him?

"ENTER THE world-famous star, coming back to her humble abode," Sam cracked as she threw open the door. She was engulfed in arms and legs as Becky leaped at her. A shower of hugs and kisses followed. "Did you miss me, kid?" Sam asked. "Oh, oh, you're choking the star." She laughed. "And I love it!"

Sylvia brought in the suitcase that Sam had left in the doorway. "Tell me

everything!" she cried, joining Sam on the sofa.

Sam sighed. "It's a succession of hotel rooms and dark stages with spotlights. It's not as glamorous as you think."

"Sure, sure," Sylvia smiled. "Boy, in show business for three months and jaded already."

"Just very, very tired," Sam protested. "And I've missed you something awful," she said to Becky.

"Can I open my presents now, Mommy? Can I?" Becky asked eagerly, scrambling off her mother's lap.

"Sure," Sam said. "Go ahead. I really didn't think you'd wait." Sam had sent her two boxes of toys with instructions not to open until her return.

"It was touch and go for a while," Sylvia told her as Becky ran off to her room for the cartons.

"Where's Jake?" she asked.

"Taking care of some last-minute business—as usual," Sam said, up to her arms in foam peanuts from Becky's boxes. Sam helped her pull a doll out. It was dressed in a long, glittering gown.

A knock on the door interrupted her, and Sam bounced to her feet. "Might be my legion of fans," she quipped.

It was Jake. She flashed him a smile. "Oh, it's only Jake," she said.

He caught her mouth for a quick kiss. "What do you mean, 'it's only Jake?' The words, love, are 'oh, thank heaven it's Jake.' Otherwise, I might not give you your present," he teased. "Hi, Sylvia," he said, then to Becky, "Hi, Peanut, whatcha got there?" He

sat down next to her on the floor. "You know, your mom bought out half of San Francisco when we were there and had it shipped to you."

"What present?" Sam asked.

"Greedy little thing, isn't she?" Jake asked Sylvia before tossing her a set of keys.

"You're giving me a new set of keys?" Sam asked. "How nice. My old ones weren't chic anymore."

Jake rose to his feet. "Always the wise guy," he said. "That, love, fits into the lock of your new house."

Sam froze. "What new house?"

"The one you're moving into," Jake told her. "Got any coffee?" he asked, heading for the kitchen.

Sam held the keys aloft. "I didn't buy a house!" she cried.

Jake opened her pantry doors. "Remember that house we saw one day that you liked so much? You said you'd like to live there."

"I meant someday," Sam said.

"Well, someday is here. The house is yours."

Sam clenched her teeth. "I don't want it."

Out of the corner of her eyes, she could see Sylvia ushering an unwilling Becky toward her bedroom.

"Sure you do," Jake told her, rummaging in the pantry. "Why do you only use instant? You know how many chemicals there are in instant coffee?" he asked, holding the jar in front of her nose.

Sam pushed it aside. "I'm happy here, Jake. I don't want the house."

"What's gotten into you?" Jake demanded. "I thought you'd be thrilled. It's a gorgeous house. You

said so yourself. Becky'll have a real room instead of a closet to sleep in. And I won't have to worry about you getting mugged."

Sam sighed, resigned for the moment to letting him have his way. It was a nice house—if only he'd gone about it all differently. "So, when do I move in, oh great leader?"

"That's better," he approved. "In a week."

"A week?" she squeaked. "I'll never have time to—"

Jake raised his hands. "All taken care of. Jane will hire some movers, and I'm sure Sylvia won't mind helping."

It was just wonderful, she couldn't help thinking, how he got people to do his bidding. "There's not much to move except clothes," she said. "This is a furnished apartment. I won't have any furniture for the house!" she realized suddenly.

"Not to worry," he assured her. "I—"

Sam held up her hands. "Oh, no, you don't. Nobody's picking out the bed I'm going to be sleeping in," she said. She wanted to pick out her own furniture for once. She had had to live with everyone else's taste all her life.

"Someone did in this apartment," he pointed out.

"Touché," she muttered. "But this time—"

"Besides, you won't have time," he said. "You've got a new act to get ready, remember?"

"But I—" She knew it was useless to protest.

"You're lucky I'm so crazy about you, love. Otherwise I wouldn't put up with you," Jake told her.

She wondered if his words were true.

They both turned as Sylvia came back into the room. "You two iron it out yet? It's getting pretty stuffy in that bedroom, what with me, Becky and thirty new toys."

"All ironed out," Jake assured her.

At least for him, Sam thought, running the back of her hand against his cheek. "Yes, I'm going to let him give me a new address," she said. "What do you think of Beverly Hills?" she asked.

Sylvia let out a long whistle. "I'd better get myself a new outfit if I'm going to visit. That is, if I'm invited," she said.

"Invited? Hell, there's a room there just for you," Jake said. "Even if you don't remember to pick up regular coffee for me," he added.

Both women stared at him in surprise.

"Well, I know Sam's not going to be happy working late at night and going off on tours if she's worrying about Becky. And Becky gets along so well with you that I thought this was the best solution."

But Sylvia shook her head. "I don't know. That's a long commute to work each morning."

"Not long," Jake said easily. "Just across the hall."

"What?" Sam demanded.

"Sylvia, how would you like to come work for Sam?"

Sylvia and Sam exchanged surprised looks.

"Is that all right with you, Sam?" Sylvia asked.

Slowly, Sam nodded. "Sure," she said uncertainly. "That is, if you don't mind."

"Mind?" Sylvia echoed. "Mind staying around you and Becky all day instead of hassling with an overbearing office manager? Are you crazy?" She laughed. "I'd love it!" She leveled a gaze at Jake. "How much?" she asked. "I don't come cheap. I demand at least a dime an hour."

"Details, details," Jake joked. "We'll work it out." He made a face over the coffee. "This is awful," he declared, pouring it down the sink.

"C'mon," Sam urged. "Let's all go celebrate."

"So long as we get back by six," Jake told her.

Sam stopped in her tracks. "Why? What's at six?"

"We have to meet a woman in my office. She's coming to interview you for *Rendezvous Magazine*," he told Sam. "See, you forgot. Why should I tell you anything? You'd forget it anyway!" he said affectionately.

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SAM BURST into her house and slammed the door. The noise echoed through the foyer and she heard the chandelier vibrate, its glass prisms tinkling.

She should be happy. Why wasn't she? "Damn it, why can't I be happy?" she asked aloud.

Sylvia came down the stairs. "Maybe it's because you're growling," she suggested.

"Very astute," Sam said, but her laughter was hollow.

"Want some tea?" Sylvia asked, leading the way into the old-fashioned country kitchen. The oven, surrounded with brick, made the room seem massive.

"This place is too big," she said, pulling up a chair. "I keep feeling I should drop breadcrumbs on my way down the hallway or I might not find my way back."

"You'll always know the way, Sam. You're a survivor."

"Some survivor," Sam jeered. "I almost slit my own throat at lunch today, heckling Peter Donaldson."

"Oh, Sam, you didn't," Sylvia cried.

"No, I didn't. That is, I did, but he was too busy laughing at my 'wonderful wit' to realize I was serious. God, I almost blew a Vegas booking at the Taj Mahal," she said. "What's the matter with me?"

"Got a bad case of nerves, I'd say," Sylvia replied.

Sam hardly heard her. "My own kid says I'm not fun anymore," she told her friend.

"I know," Sylvia said quietly. "But this is all new to you. You'll be okay once you catch your breath."

"I've been running after my breath for so long I don't think I'd recognize it if I saw it."

"Sure you would. It's the big wind that's always flapping."

Sam turned to find Jake in the room behind her. "I see you found me," she said.

"Fred remembers the address," Jake said dryly, sitting down opposite her.

"What did you mean by running off like that and not even taking the car? I was worried sick."

"Thought you lost your client, did you?" she asked.

"Sylvia?" It was all he needed to say. Sylvia was up and out of the room, shaking her head sadly.

Jake's first reaction was anger. He wanted to shake her. Her words had stung. His next reaction was pity when he saw her unhappy face. But he knew she didn't respond to either emotion, so he took her hands and gently drew her into his lap.

At first Sam struggled, but suddenly the fight went out of her, and she let him hold her.

"Are you crying?" Jake asked. He touched her face, examining a lone tear.

"Usually when there are tears the person with wet cheeks is crying—or peeling onions." She sniffed.

"I've never seen you cry before."

"I don't usually take out an ad to announce it."

"Is it as bad as all that?" he asked.

She didn't trust her voice. She nodded, burying her head in his neck.

He stroked her hair, rocking her gently in his arms.

Sam sighed. Don't think, she ordered herself. Just live for the moment. Her arms tightened about his neck.

BRIAN SAUNDERS looked both pleased and surprised to see Sam standing in his office. She looked far more poised and sophisticated than she had eight months ago.

"Samantha, sit down," he said warmly. "What are you doing here?"

"Slumming," she said, then laughed. The laugh was real and full. It told Brian that she was merely teasing. "Actually," she said, "I've come to ask you a favor."

"Anything."

"You should have some reservations, Brian," she chided. "Someone could take advantage of you."

"Not you, Samantha."

"Boy, that sure puts me on my honor," she cracked.

He could see her veneer of sophistication peel away slowly, revealing the true Samantha beneath.

Brian sat down on the edge of his desk. "Where's your mentor?"

"Jake? Putting the finishing touches on my stint at the Taj Mahal," she said. "I open in a week."

"Yes. I've seen the ads. I'm very happy for you."

"That's what the favor is about," she began. "I want to try out my act here."

"Fantastic!" he enthused.

Sam was relieved. "Now, don't let me twist your arm."

SAM HEARD the familiar strains of the song Jake had chosen as her theme and, holding her microphone tightly, she strode out on the stage of the Taj Mahal. She could feel the wave of energy take hold of her. The houselights dimmed. She was on! The pit of her stomach churned madly. She felt her breath get short. Please don't let me forget my lines. Please.

Her rapid-fire delivery began before she reached center stage.

"I'm a product of a broken home. Actually, I broke it. My folks took one look at me and decided that a marriage that produced me wasn't half bad—it was all bad....

Sam went on, baring chosen bits and pieces of her life, playing for laughs scenes that had once evoked secret tears. The audience loved it, and she grew high on their laughter and the temporary acceptance in their applause.

By the time it was over she was utterly drained, and yet flying. She left the stage amid a crescendo of laughter and hearty applause.

Jake opened her dressing-room door for her. "You were wonderful," he told her. When she had tried out her act at Brian's club she had been a huge success, and now she had been playing the main room at the Taj Mahal for eight weeks. She had been held over for six weeks, a record for a newcomer. And they were still coming in droves to see her. Everyone wanted to soak up a bit of her laughter, Jake thought fondly. *He* just wanted to soak up a bit of her. Would she ever let down her defenses totally, let him touch the sweet, vulnerable woman who lived behind all those sharp retorts?

"Of course I was. I always am," Sam replied, tossing off the remark with a note of charged gaiety. She caught the strange, pensive expression on his face as she looked at him in her mirror. "What are you thinking?"

He thought of telling her everything that was rattling around in his head. But this wasn't the time. She was too wound up. He touched a strand of her

hair, playing with it absently. "Nothing."

Sam sighed. For one instant she had hoped that he was going to say something intimate. Something wonderful. There had been a look in his eyes... Oh, what was wrong with her? She was basking in the approval of scores of people. She was a hit. Why did she crave one more person's approval? But for some insane reason she wished with all her heart that Jake would just say "I love you." Why couldn't he...?

"YOU DID WHAT?" Sam cried, her voice rising to ricochet off the walls of her dressing room a week later. It was ten minutes before her show, and she seemed to need increasingly more time to psych herself up to meet the audience. Fear of failure now gnawed at her more than ever. But everything was shoved aside as Sam stared at Jake.

"It wasn't right for you," Jake insisted, trying to calm her down. He had made the mistake of telling her that he had turned down a movie offer for her.

"You didn't even ask me about it!" she cried. "You had no right to turn it down!"

"I'm your manager," he pointed out, getting tired of this constant battle of wills. "I have every right."

"I really wanted that part," Sam railed.

"Five minutes, Miss Madison," a voice called out.

She'd never make it. Her mind was a blank.

Jake sensed her dilemma. The argument died. "Are you going to be able to make it?" he asked gently.

Not: Don't go on, Sam, you're too upset. Not: I'll tell them to cancel the show and take you home. No, that would mean he cared more for her than for what she represented to him.

Jake felt her stiffen. "Just let me at them," she said. They were waiting. At least *they* loved her.

SOMEHOW SAM got through it. She didn't even remember how. The applause rang out as loud as ever. Louder. But it rang hollow. She vaguely recalled that this was her last night at the Taj Mahal.

"Terrific, as always," the announcer told her as she walked off. God, she was tired. So tired.

Jake was waiting for her, a look of concern on his face. "What's the matter?" she asked. "Didn't it go well?"

"You were there," Jake whispered. "You tell me."

"Great," she retorted. "The announcer said I was great. The audience thought I was great."

"You were slightly off," Jake observed, walking behind her as she strode toward her dressing room.

"I'll try harder, oh fearless leader," she quipped.

They were inside her dressing room, and Jake caught her up in his arms, half a fierce gesture and half protective. It startled her.

"Jake, this is so sudden," she cracked. "It's been over a week since we've touched more than pinkies."

Jake studied her face for a long moment before Sam spoke. "Oh, no, you don't. You're not taking over my mind as well. You've annexed everything else."

Jake let her go. "Sam, what are you talking about?"

Sam began to pace. "I have no control," she spat out.

"I've often said that." For some reason he felt a sudden urgent need to keep it light. She was going to walk out on him. He saw it coming.

But Sam wouldn't be put off. "I have no control over what's happening in my life, no control over myself. No say in what I do or don't do." She stepped back, out of reach. She didn't want him holding her, fogging up her thinking. "You once said I was the best thing you ever came up with," she snapped.

"You are," Jake said, not understanding her anger.

"I'm not a *thing*," she shouted. "And you didn't come up with me. I was around before you jauntily sauntered into my life!"

"I know you were." In contrast to her railing, his voice was now suddenly quiet. He was being so understanding, she thought, without really understanding the problem, damn it.

Jake's arms went around her sagging shoulders, his tender silence urging her to speak.

"I need to feel your love," Sam said, her voice barely a whisper. In response Jake's embrace tightened. "No," she said, pulling back. "Not that. A different kind of love."

"You mean there's something we haven't covered?" he asked, trying to tease her out of her mood.

"Yes, there is," she said. "I need to feel it inside. I need to be my own person, too. I need... to make my own decisions," she said.

"So what are you saying?" Jake asked finally. "That you want to go it alone?"

"I don't know what I'm saying...." she said.

"Nice to know some things stay the same. Listen," Jake proposed, "this is your last night in Vegas. Why don't we paint the town red?"

"With all those neon lights, who'd notice?" Sam scoffed.

He sat down next to her on the sofa. "We would."

"I'm too tired," she protested, but she felt herself wanting him. Even in the heat of an argument, or the midst of despair, she felt an almost desperate desire for him. She realized that she was never as alive as when he made love to her.

Jake held her close for a moment, then smiled down into her upturned face. "How about we paint each other red?" he suggested.

"Will it wash off?" she bantered.

"Not if we do it right. Let me take you back to your room and make all those wrinkles on your forehead fade away," he said gently, getting up and taking her hand.

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SAM TRIED very hard to lose herself in Jake's arms that night. She hoped that her physical reaction while making love with him would partially drive away the encroaching self-doubts.

But it didn't.

Although Jake was as gentle and as loving as ever, it didn't help. *He* didn't help. Because he didn't say the things she needed to hear. He misunderstood her mood. Reading the tired lines in

her brow, he cut short their lovemaking and merely held her in his arms. Soon he fell asleep.

Sam took it to mean that he wasn't even interested enough to prolong the one blissful moment she could still reach. Her heart hurt so much that she thought it would break. She had lost him. If she'd ever had him at all.

Sam sighed. As her breasts rose and fell beneath her lacy nightgown she watched Jake's outstretched arm rise and fall along with them. Then slowly she lifted his arm, taking care not to wake him. She swung her legs down, glancing over her shoulder to see if he was still asleep. The last thing she wanted now was to have him reach out for her. If he did, she'd lose her nerve and stay. And right now, she didn't want to.

After getting dressed in the dark Sam left behind her suitcases and trunks filled with the gorgeous dresses that Jake had chosen for her. She wore only her jeans and a baggy sweater. Grabbing her purse, she tiptoed to the door.

She hesitated as she looked back at Jake. What would he think when he found her gone? Would he give up on her? She hadn't been easy to get along with of late....

Sam left the suite.

THE HOUSE was filling up early, Brian thought as he surveyed the club. Monday night always brought a good crowd and the club had attracted a lot more people since the trade papers had said Sam had gotten her start there on Amateur Night. Many came hoping for a bit of her phenomenal luck—not real-

izing that Sam made her own luck, Brian thought.

Brian nodded his dark head at several patrons as he made his way to the back of the room. He stopped when he saw the woman in the baggy blue sweater.

"Samantha?" he asked, staring at her.

"Hi, Brian," she said. "I'm here to catch the competition."

Brian eyed her closely. Her voice was chipper, but she looked very tired. He sat down next to her at the small table. "You don't look too good, Sam," Brian told her honestly.

Sam pretended to watch the young comic on stage. "Maybe it's because I don't feel so good," she said in a low voice. "The dream didn't turn out so well." She swallowed, realizing that she was fighting back tears. Then she looked up at Brian, a trace of desperation in her eyes. "Am I crazy, Brian?"

"No," he said kindly. "I don't think so."

"That kid up there is spilling his guts out trying to get to where I am. I was that kid ten months ago. I bet he's a lot happier than I am right now."

"Maybe yes, maybe no. We make our own happiness in this world, Samantha," Brian said.

"You sound like a fortune cookie." She laughed.

"Wise men, those ancient Chinese." He smiled, covering her hand with his own. "Would you like to go on?"

She looked at him, then down at her outfit. "Brian, are you serious? I look like a beach bum."

"This is California. Beach bums are in. Besides, they'd want to hear you, not take inventory of your clothes."

She hadn't gone on in months without the proper clothing. It was her prop. Sam swallowed. "You'd throw me to the sharks naked, huh?" she asked, feeling her adrenaline beginning to pump. Just like the first time.

"They're not sharks, Samantha. They're your friends. It's time you were your own friend," he said. And Brian got up and headed for the stage.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have a special surprise for you tonight."

As if in a trance, Sam heard Brian's introduction and the thunderous wave of applause that met his statement. Then she was on the stage, and every eye in the place was on her.

"I bet you're all wondering what I'm doing here," she said glibly. "Well, I'll tell you the truth." She paused. "I don't know." Tittering began. They were ready for a laugh and were meeting her more than halfway. It wasn't a tough audience. It was a loving audience. Her tension began slipping from her. . . . Just the way her clothes did when Jake made love to her. That was it. She was making love to the audience, making them feel good. She had a love affair with her audience. The zest that she had thought was gone forever was back—in spades.

Sam stayed on for twenty minutes. The more they laughed, the better she got. Her eyes were shining. All that was missing was Jake.

At the end she was even openly, honestly modest. "Well, enough about me. I could go on all night, but Brian

isn't paying for this," she said, grinning at him. "Time to tell those people backstage to stop quivering and grab a little life, right?" she asked, referring to the contestant still waiting to go on. She made her way back to her table.

Applause rang in her ears. Some people were even giving her a standing ovation. Or were they just trying to see where she was sitting? She was going to have to leave, she thought as soon as she retrieved her purse.

Jake was at the table.

Suddenly the audience, the applause and the room all faded away. All she saw was Jake.

"You were very good," he said quietly.

"What, no notes?" she quipped.

He shook his head. "Seems you don't need me anymore."

She pressed her lips together. "A hell of a lot you know," she retorted, making her way toward the door.

It took some doing for Jake to catch up to her. People kept trying to snare Sam's attention, shoving papers and pencils at her when she wanted to run. Someone caught her arm. Another autograph. She hastily scribbled her name on a napkin for a stout woman who clutched it to her chest. Jake grabbed Sam's wrist.

"Miss Madison's tired right now, folks. I'm sure you can understand that. She's had a hard day."

At his commanding manner, the fans retreated. "Can I take you home, or would you like to run off again?" he asked Sam as they went outside.

She saw his limousine. "I wasn't running away," she said.

Jake led her to the car. "Oh? What do you call disappearing into the night, leaving all your clothes?"

"I went for a walk and I got carried away," she lied.

Jake snorted. "I'd like to carry you away."

Sam turned to look at him, her eyes searching his face in the moonlight. "Would you, Jake? Would you really?"

In answer to her question Jake swept her into his arms and kissed her hard. He had never been anything but gentle and loving before. Now she felt unbridled passion in his kiss. And something more. Something very powerful.

"Wow," Sam said, exhaling when their lips parted. "I think I'm branded for life."

"I only wish you were," Jake said, his voice low.

"What?" she asked, confused.

"I don't want to talk about it out in the open. Fred wants to turn in early. He spent half the day combing Las Vegas before he drove out here. The man hasn't had time to go to the bathroom yet," Jake muttered.

"Don't you think you should let him go home, then?" Sam asked as they reached the car.

"Not until we get a few things settled first," Jake said. As he climbed in Sam saw Fred beaming at her.

"You were right, sir," he said to Jake.

"He's always right," Sam said wryly.

"No, I'm not," Jake said quietly as he closed the door. "I've been wrong about a lot of things lately it seems. Wrong about you."

Sam retreated into silence. He was going to leave her. This was her punishment.

"I think," Jake said to her, "that we have to talk."

"So talk," she said flippantly.

"Not me," Jake said. "Us."

"Were you really worried?" she asked in a small voice.

"No, I love prowling around with Fred at strange hours, asking people if they've seen you. They thought I was some groupie. Of course I was worried!" he shouted. "What the hell's the matter with you?"

Her own temper rose. "What do you care?" she spat.

"I care, Sam. I care a great deal! Don't you know that?" he cried in disbelief.

"No, I don't," she said. "You never said anything."

"What about all those nights we spent together?"

"I thought you were just...placating me," she said.

"Oh, so that's how it's done." He laughed, and his tone changed. "Well, you certainly didn't act placated," he said fondly, pulling her closer. "Now hear this," he announced, lifting a thick strand of her hair and speaking directly into her ear. "I love Samantha Madison. She's the most wonderful thing—person," he corrected, "that's ever happened to me. And," he went on, "I'm afraid of losing her."

Sam couldn't believe what she was hearing. "I won't walk out on my contract," she promised.

"To hell with that! You think I want you when you're miserable? Sam, if I held the reins a little too tight. I did it

for you. I'm the manager, I knew the score and I wanted all the success I could get for you because I thought that was what *you* wanted."

"Very altruistic of you," she said.

"In case you haven't noticed," Jake said, his impatience rising again, "I don't need the money."

"And in case you haven't noticed," Sam said, "success doesn't make me happy. *You* make me happy."

It was his turn to stare at her. "Are you saying you love me?"

"Do you want a note?" she asked.

"No," he answered. "I want proof."

Sam rolled her eyes upward. "Ah, 'prove your love for me.' They told me there'd be men like you in my life."

"Did they now?" he asked, bantering back.

"No," she said, taking his face in her small hands. "Not like you. Not ever. I love you, Jake. With all my heart and soul. I love you." Tears began to gather in her eyes.

"So what are you going to do about it?" he said.

"What am I supposed to do about it?"

"Ask me to marry you," he said simply.

"What!"

"C'mon," he urged, "take the lead. Ask me."

She paused, utterly stunned. "Will you?" she asked.

"Will I? I'll even wear the damn wedding gown if you want!" he declared.

"I don't want to wear the pants in this relationship," she told him.

"Neither do I," he countered with a devilish twinkle. "They get in the

way." He reached across her thigh and stroked her upper leg, igniting all the warm, wonderful sensations that only he could produce. Then he opened the smoked-glass partition. "Fred, we're getting married!" he announced.

Fred's enthusiasm was tempered with a groan. "Now?" he asked.

Sam shook her head. "In the morning."

Jake turned to Sam and whispered, "Good. We can rehearse the wedding night."

Sam surrendered herself to the heaven she now knew was waiting for her as her lips met his.

"How COULD YOU not have known that I loved you?" Jake asked later that night as they lay in each other's arms, their energy nearly spent.

Sam snuggled against him, neatly tucked into the curve made by his body. "I thought you were enamored of the image you had created."

"I'm in love with you, dummy, smart mouth and all. You're what makes it all work. A lot of perfect-looking women have floated through my life. But there was only one Sam. You're an original."

"But all the clothes, the hairdo, the—"

"That was for your act. I wanted you to succeed."

"But you never said anything," she stressed.

"Love is something you're supposed to feel," Jake told her. "Like now."

She could feel him getting aroused again. "That's not love," she said. "That's just a physical response."

"Would you settle for a little physical response à la mode?" he asked, looking down at her face.

"As long as it's sprinkled liberally with love," she insisted, wrapping her arms about his neck.

"What a demanding female," he said. "It's not enough that I do this." He kissed one breast, teasing it with deft strokes of his tongue. "Or this." He turned his attention to the other breast, this time closing his lips over the peak and tugging at it gently, creating havoc within her. "Or this." Suddenly his tongue was trailing down toward her belly, making the area moist and warm as he covered it with a circle of kisses. He was fondling her lower still, preparing her for the onslaught that was to follow.

Sam tried to remain still, but she could feel herself losing the battle. The sheet slipped lower, down to the next level of attack as his mouth inched slowly downward, recapturing each space that his hand had set free.

"If you lock your knees like that," she heard him say against her abdomen, "you're going to miss the best part."

"No I'm not," she said with an effort. "You're the best part."

"Funny, I was just thinking the same thing about you."

His kisses reduced her to a creature of sheer feeling. She clutched at his head, adoring the sensations his mouth was producing, but wanting to feel his lips on hers. Gently she tugged at him, bringing him back up to her.

"I love you, Sam," Jake said hoarsely as the length of his poised body touched hers.

"Funny," she said, moving to receive him, "I was just thinking the same thing about you."

But there was nothing funny about it. It was wonderful. As a feeling of

sheer ecstasy filled her loins, a bursting joy took hold of Sam. She had finally found her place in the sun. Sam was home.



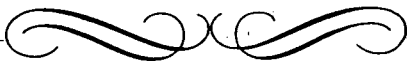


MARGARET ST. GEORGE

Castles and Fairy Tales



So many women expected a man like David to set them up in a castle on a hill. But not Jenna. She'd become the successful artist she'd always said she would be and was brimming with confidence...wasn't she?



Oh, no. Jenny Marshall peered over the top of her sunglasses toward the man emerging from the ocean. He shaded his eyes and looked toward the line of cabanas and beach loungers where Jenny was sitting.

It couldn't be him, Jenny thought. The man on the beach looked exactly as Jenny had always imagined David Foster would look after fifteen years, even more handsome than when she'd known him in college. He had David Foster's dark, curly hair, David Foster's lean, muscled body, David Foster's confident, lopsided smile.

In her fantasies, Jenny ran into David Foster when she was wearing something chic and slinky, casually draped by a million-dollar mink coat and shimmering with diamonds and drenched in a perfume that drove men to their knees. How she had acquired these items the fantasy didn't explain, but she had them and she wore them with panache. In the fantasy, she glanced out the window of a chauffeur-driven Mercedes and smiled pityingly at David in his battered VW, exchanged a few gracious pleasantries with him, then drove away. She left him devastated, ready to kill himself that he hadn't begged her to marry him when he'd had the chance.

Not once had zinc oxide and a sunburn figured in her fantasy.

"Jenny? What's the matter?" Pam Alder pushed up in her lounge. "You look funny."

Didn't she know it.

Jenny sighed and wished she had a gorgeous tan instead of being beet-red beneath the towel spread over her legs. She wished she'd worn makeup to the beach and that the zinc oxide painted over her nose would vanish.

Most of all, she wished Pam Alder, her neighbor and best friend, had not convinced her to come to Cancún with her while Pam inspected the site for the travel agency she worked for. Jenny was sure she had bras older than most of the people on the beach here.

Jumping to her feet, Jenny rapidly gathered her belongings into her beach bag. Ducking her head, she fled across the beach, paused to wash the sand from her feet, then hurried through the hotel lobby and into the elevator that would whisk her to the safety of the room she shared with Pam.

Inside, she stood still a moment, enjoying the flow of cooled air over her flushed face. David Foster, here in Cancún.

"Are you crazy?" Pam said, shutting the door behind her. "Mind telling me what this is all about?"

"Did I ever tell you about David Foster?"

"Only a hundred times."

Jenny drew a breath. "Well, that was him."

Pam sat up straighter. "The bronzed-god type with the graying temples?" Jenny nodded.

"I didn't want him to see me like this."

Jenny stared into the mirror. All her insecurities surged to the surface. She wasn't a modern-day princess who owned a chauffeur-driven Mercedes. She didn't own a mink coat or any diamonds. She was a divorced mother of two with more bills than income. Jenny supposed that anyone who had known her in college—like David Foster—would say she hadn't lived up to her early potential. Somehow the potential had gotten lost along the way.

There just hadn't been enough time. She'd told herself she would develop her painting after Walter's business got off the ground. But before that happened, Deuce had arrived and then Rhonda. The years had passed in a blur. Finally, Jenny had blinked and looked around and Walter was gone, the kids were teenagers, and she'd achieved none of her dreams. All she had was enough potential to earn a living painting greeting-card covers. Which was nothing like real painting.

"Pam, what am I going to do?"

"Are you kidding? Fix yourself up and go find David Foster."

"It isn't that simple." Nothing ever was. "When David and I were dating, he thought I was . . . special."

"You are special."

"No, I'm not. I'm a thirty-seven-year-old divorced housewife."

"An artist."

"A dauber. It's not the same thing. But David . . . David is very successful." She'd kept up with him through

the alumni newsletter. "Have you heard of Foster/Beta computers?"

Pam rolled her eyes. "Anyone living in the twentieth century has heard of Foster/Beta computers. It's the success story of the decade. Two guys working in their garage come up with a state-of-the-art computer and make millions."

"Right. David Foster is the Foster in Foster/Beta."

Pam fell backward on the bed and looked at the ceiling. She looked at her watch. "There's a get-acquainted cocktail party and buffet on the terrace in an hour and a half. You have ninety minutes to get gorgeous."

Jenny grinned; then the smile faded. "I don't know, Pam. David has been so successful and I—" she bit her lip—"I saw his picture in *Time* magazine, for heaven's sake. Receiving some kind of award." Her hands lifted and fell. "I'm not in that league."

"We're not talking about marriage here, Jen. We're talking about an hour. You say: 'Long time no see.' He says: 'How are you?' You say: 'Fine. How are you?' And that's it. He drifts away, and you and I look around and see if we can find you a man over twenty."

Pam was right, Jenny thought. They'd chat for a while, exchange a few "remember whens," then Jenny would drift away. David would gaze after her with bittersweet longing, knowing his life would have been fuller and richer if he'd married Jenny when he had the opportunity.

Fat chance. She thought of his photo in *Time*, thought of the celebrities he probably knew, the parties he and his wife, Marilyn, probably gave. And her

shoulders slumped for a moment. He would speak of being on the board of directors of Foster/Beta, and Jenny would brightly offer having served as president of the PTA for three terms. He would mention leading a giant corporation to greatness; she would mention coaching her girls' soccer team to a winning season. He would ooze financial security; she would think of the bills stuffed in her desk drawer.

She gave Pam a glum look.

"Cinderella was one lucky girl, do you know that?" she said. "One tap of a wand and all the drudgery vanished. Princess for a night."

Too bad it couldn't happen to Jenny Marshall.

DAVID FOSTER stood near the stone wall separating the terrace from the beach, cradling a Scotch-and-water in one hand. He glanced over the noisy crowd and turned to Hernan Mortiz, the Palenque Hotel's manager. "Am I imagining it, Hernan, or are there a hundred females for every man?"

Hernan Mortiz laughed. "Actually we have about sixty more males than females this time."

"How many total?"

"Hard to say. During singles' week they sneak in friends, pack four and five to a room." He shrugged broadly.

David knew the Palenque had two hundred and thirty-four rooms, with a capacity for four hundred and twenty-eight—four hundred and forty-two, if the roll-away beds were all used. He knew exactly what the Palenque had grossed last year and how much was net. If pressed, David could have given an accurate estimate of how many piña

coladas were sold each day from the thatched poolside bar.

"But mostly college students?"

"Probably. We set singles' week to coincide with spring break."

David nodded. Cancún was just beginning to be known as a vacation spot. The college kids would go home and tell everyone they knew about Cancún. And they would come back, along with parents and friends.

His instinct had been right. Now was the time to invest, before it became as famous as he sensed it would be in the not-so-distant future.

"When does Spenser arrive?" Rob Spenser was the lawyer putting together the syndication of the Palenque. "Friday?" When Hernan confirmed it, David nodded. That gave him three days to explore on his own before receiving an official tour.

Then he saw the statuesque blonde descending the lobby stairs. David studied her a moment before experiencing a shock of recognition.

Jenny. It was Jenny Tucker. His chest tightened as it hadn't done in years at the sight of a woman.

He watched her a moment, enjoying the vivacity in her expression. A crinkling about the eyes told of frequent laughter; a slight tug at the corners of her lips suggested she'd had her share of disappointments. But it was her blue eyes that captivated him. Her eyes were curious and alert, eager for life's next moment.

There was no hint of the boredom he'd been accustomed to in Marilyn's expression. No secrecy.

He looked behind her to see if she was followed by a husband and was

surprised at the intensity of his relief when no man moved forward.

The least he could do was say hello.

He excused himself from Hernan and crossed the room to the buffet tables.

"Jenny? Jenny Tucker?"

"David Foster! What a surprise."

She smiled into his dark eyes and her heart lurched into overdrive. The years fell away and she felt like a giddy college girl again. "It's Marshall now. Jenny Marshall." Was that disappointment in his eyes? Jenny spooned a mound of something onto her plate and tried to sound as if encountering her first true love was no big deal. "So. How are you?"

How banal could one get?

"Fine. And you?"

"Sunburned." As if he couldn't see that. "I don't know what caused it."

"Probably that big hot thing up in the sky," Pam murmured. Jenny jabbed her elbow in Pam's ribs.

Jenny managed to reach the table without spilling her plate down her skirt.

"Well, I'll be darned," Pam said. She peered across the tables and candlelight. "I believe that's... yes, it is. My cousin Sam and his wife. From Des Moines." Smiling, Pam pushed from the table. "If you two don't mind, I'll just go say hello to Fred..."

"Sam," Jenny corrected.

When Pam had disappeared in the direction of the band, Jenny smiled. "She doesn't have a cousin in Des Moines."

"I didn't think so."

It occurred to her that, for the moment, she and Cinderella shared a lot

in common, after all. She was sitting across a candlelit table from a handsome prince. She felt enchanted. She blossomed beneath the interested approval in David's eyes.

"Tell me about yourself," she said.

"After graduation you married, uh..."

Jenny frowned, pretending she didn't have Marilyn Cody's name burned into her brain.

Organized, efficient, cool under fire, Marilyn had managed the sorority as deliberately and as smoothly as she'd managed her life. Nothing left to chance, everything calculated and calibrated well in advance.

David supplied the name. "Marilyn. Marilyn Cody. We're divorced."

"Oh. That's a shame," Jenny commented. There was justice after all. "I've kept track of you somewhat, through the alumni newsletter. I know you and Marilyn moved to California, where you and a friend developed Foster/Beta Computer Systems."

"A lucky accident, actually."

"You're being too modest. I read that Foster/Beta had been sold to IBM. For a fabulous sum. That's wonderful, David. You've been as successful as everyone who knew you guessed you would be."

He looked uncomfortable. "We sold to IBM, that's true. As to the price... you know how the media exaggerate."

The media were a mystery to Jenny, but she was flattered that he seemed to think she would know how it operated.

"So. What are you doing now?" she asked.

"Now?" He gestured to the waiter for wine. "I guess you could say I'm an investment broker."

"Oh." Obviously the media had indeed exaggerated. Jenny had assumed David had netted enough from the sale of Foster/Beta to free him from ever having to work again.

He gazed at her across the candles. "Enough about me. Tell me everything about Jenny Marshall. Where is Mr. Marshall?"

"Walter and I are divorced."

His eyes met hers. "I'd like to say I'm sorry, but that would be a lie. Any children?"

"Two." Jenny's face lit up as it always did at the mention of her children. "Deuce is thirteen and Rhonda is twelve going on thirty."

"I understand. I have a twelve-year-old daughter, too." He smiled. "Deuce is an unusual name."

"It stands for Walter Marshall the second." Jenny smiled softly, suddenly missing her children. "They're in California right now, visiting Walter during spring break."

"Walter lives in California, then."

Jenny nodded and smiled. "Walter went berserk when he turned forty, two years ago. He decided he had to find himself. Apparently he wasn't in Denver, so he bought a motorcycle and went to California to see if he was out there." She looked at her hands. "Apparently he was."

David reached across the table and lightly covered her hand. "Usually when divorced people speak of ex-spouses, there's bitterness in their voices. But I don't hear any in yours."

Jenny's eyebrows lifted. "Walter and I are both nice people. He tried and I tried; we just couldn't make it work." Curiosity flickered in her eyes. "Is there a lot of bitterness between you and Marilyn?"

"I'm afraid so." For a moment he stared at a point in space. Then the lines between his brows smoothed and he smiled. "Now, tell me about your art. Are you famous? What happened to you after you went to Rome?"

There it was, the question she had dreaded.

How had Cinderella handled this? Would she have explained to the prince that she was the family cleaning lady? Would she have admitted that balls and palaces and splendid new gowns weren't her usual bill of fare? Or would she have decided to prolong the magic of the evening by not shattering the prince's illusion?

Of course she would have.

Jenny thought of her unpaid bills, her cluttered house. Dull stuff. As for her art—the covers she painted for New Image Greeting Cards didn't approach the masterpieces she had dreamed of painting when she first met David.

"Jenny?"

"I'm sorry, I was daydreaming, remembering the day I first met you. At an art museum. I told you then that, someday, one of my paintings would hang in a museum."

He pressed her hand. "I remember. Let me guess—one of your paintings is now hanging in the Denver Art Museum."

Okay, Cinderella. Here we go. Jenny drew a long breath and listened to her-

self with something akin to amazement. "Not one—but two." She couldn't believe she was doing this.

"Two? Congratulations, Jenny. I always knew you'd be a success!" His smile warmed with genuine pleasure. He was happy for her.

His smile convinced Jenny that she and Cinderella had made the right decision. After all, what harm could it do? After this week she and David would fly back to their separate lives and that would be the end of that. Her pride would be intact and she'd have had the fun of living out a long-standing fantasy of what might have been.

"Start at the beginning. How did you get from being an art student in Rome to having your work hung in the Denver Art Museum?"

She nodded and hoped the odd expression in her eyes could be mistaken for modesty. Then she told him about studying in Rome, most of it the truth, but omitting her loneliness and how the arrival of a simple cream-colored invitation had changed her life. *Mr. and Mrs. Archibald Cody request the honor of your presence at the marriage of their daughter, Marilyn Elizabeth Cody, to David Westridge Foster.*

"The year ended with an exhibition. And Frascotti featured my work."

That's how it might have been, should have been. But it hadn't worked out that way. When it became evident that Jenny was too frozen to paint, Maestro Frascotti had been forced to dismiss her. She had silently packed

her supplies and flown home to Denver. Defeated.

"Go on," David said, bringing her back to the present.

Firmly, Jenny put the past's reality aside and spun a tale of the future she had dreamed of. She spoke of private showings and public triumphs. She hinted at champagne receptions and media acclaim. She placed herself firmly in David's world, a world of glittering parties, celebrities and financial success. It was intoxicating.

When she finally made herself look away from him, she discovered they were the only guests remaining on the terrace.

"Good heavens. What time is it?"

A line of waiters stood by the emptied buffet, yawning and quietly talking. The tables had been stripped and reset for breakfast.

"It's after midnight."

Jenny groaned. "And I have to be up at seven o'clock to catch the tour of Chichén Itzá."

He held her chair, his hands brushing electricity across her shoulders. "So do I—if you'll tell me where to sign up." David placed his hand on her cheek. His thumb lightly traced the curve of her lips. "I'm very glad to have found you again."

Then she floated—there was no other word for it—to her room.

WATCHING David Foster board a tour bus was a little like watching Prince Charles open his own car door. Despite her long-held fantasy of driving her imaginary Mercedes past David, who was behind the wheel of a bat-

tered VW, she never really pictured him that way. She envisioned him as the type for chauffeur-driven limos. The type who strolled into a restaurant and immediately the staff snapped to, saluted and bowed low.

"What's funny?" David asked when they were settled on the bus beside a large tinted window.

"I don't know. Somehow I just never imagined a genius like you—someone who could bring IBM to its knees—would take a bus tour. I always supposed you VIPs toured in limos."

"I'm hardly a VIP. What about you? Don't world-famous artists rate a limo?"

Lord, she'd forgotten. Luckily, she was spared a reply, because the guide, Carlos, chose that moment to begin an introductory speech as the bus pulled from the hotel grounds.

The bus passed through a succession of villages. Carlos explained that under Mexican law the villagers could earn the deed to as much land as they could clear, fence and maintain. Jenny and David saw women washing clothes in front of the pole huts, men clearing jungle growth with machetes, children feeding chickens and pigs.

"It looks like a hard life," Jenny commented.

"I suppose. But there's something appealing about the simplicity. Life today has become increasingly complicated. And our values have suffered. It isn't enough to have a house anymore; we have to have a show-place. We don't have jobs; we have careers. People aren't measured by their integrity and strength of character, but

by the fatness of their bank accounts. Money is the yardstick of success in our society. And I'm not convinced that's such a good thing. A man may be a bastard in every sense of the word, but if he has enough money, he's accepted—and even admired."

"Are you suggesting successful people lose their values?"

"Some do." He'd seen it happen again and again. Even in his own marriage. "That's one of the many things I like about you," he said, taking Jenny's hand. "You're successful, but it hasn't changed you." He rolled his head across the back of the seat and looked into her blue eyes. "I can't tell you how glad I am to have found you again."

They looked at each other for a moment that seemed to stretch toward eternity. He had the darkest, gentlest eyes she'd ever seen.

At the rest stop they bought ice-cream cones for themselves and souvenirs for the kids. After much vacillation, Jenny chose an onyx chess set for Deuce and a shell necklace for Rhonda. David paused before a display of gold earrings, then ended by choosing a shell necklace for his daughter similar to the one Jenny had selected for Rhonda. She watched him curiously.

Had he decided against the gold earrings because he couldn't afford them? Jenny admitted to a growing confusion. She was picking up mixed signals. The expensive Rolex watch he wore and all she'd previously known suggested David enjoyed a very comfortable standard of living. But, he'd also made it clear he didn't have the

wealth she'd guessed, and that he was working as an investment broker, which had surprised her. She didn't care if he was as rich as Howard Hughes or if he had a drawer full of unpaid bills, as she did. He was still David.

When the bus finally reached Chichén Itzá, Jenny was awestruck. "For the first time since I set foot on the Yucatán peninsula I feel positively young, like an infant," she said, staring at the massive stone ruins.

David laughed. "Good. Then you won't mind climbing to the top of Kulcán's temple."

The climb was easier described than done. Jenny was panting when she reached the top, and muttering darkly about losing an extra five pounds if it killed her. But the view was spectacular. Oceans of green jungle surrounded the clearing, and here and there the tops of ruins protruded above the dense foliage. "Breathtaking," she pronounced.

"I agree," David said, looking down at her.

"I meant the view."

Their eyes met and held, and suddenly Jenny felt as she had long ago with David. Tension drew her stomach tight.

They inspected the famous Mayan ball court, the sacrificial well and the Temple of the Warriors. Within the Temple of the Warriors was a stone statue of a reclining *chacmool* who held a bowl in his lap, which, Carlos explained, was to receive the hearts of sacrificial victims.

David snapped a photo of Jenny sitting in the *chacmool*'s lap.

By the time they returned, hand in hand, to the bus, Jenny was exhausted. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to rest her head on David's shoulder as the bus eased from the lot and began the long journey back to Cancún. Before she snuggled deeper into his shoulder and dozed, Jenny thought his lips brushed her hair, but she wasn't sure. The next thing she heard was Carlos's voice crackling over the loudspeaker.

"Siesta's over, my friends. Here's the hotel."

In the lobby, David glanced at his watch. "It's six o'clock now; suppose I meet you and Pam at eight o'clock for dinner. There's a restaurant in town called La Habichuela that has lobster in three sizes—normal, jumbo and colossal."

"Colossal? I can't wait." She touched his cheek lightly. "See you at eight o'clock."

THE COLOSSAL lobsters were everything David had promised. Their table was in a tropical garden, lit by subtly concealed colored lights.

"Have you attended Jenny's art showings?" David asked Pam.

"I can honestly say I haven't missed any showing Jenny has had," Pam replied after a tiny hesitation. Jenny had relayed the fantasy she'd told David.

"Even the international showings?" David pressed Jenny's hand. "Now, that's a friend."

"Well, I am a travel agent," Pam explained, with a quick, narrowed glance at Jenny's innocent smile. "I can usually travel free."

"Jenny, love, remember the painting you gave me before you left for Rome."

"The old man standing beside the horse?"

David smiled. "It's probably worth a fortune today. An early Jenny Marshall."

If one considered six dollars and fifty-three cents—the cost of the paint and canvas—a fortune. Considering the price of hamburger, Jenny decided it was.

"What's the worst part about being famous?"

"Autographs, I think," Jenny said grandly. "It's very strange having people ask for my autograph."

"I'll bet," Pam commented dryly.

The evening passed in a dream, in a blur of enchantment. Jenny was surprised and slightly ashamed of how easily the details of her invented life rolled off her tongue. Under David's interested questioning she spoke of glittering receptions, exhaustive media interviews, a life that was glamorous and exciting. She sounded like a woman who wouldn't recognize a can of furniture polish if one dropped into her lap, like a woman who was confident and sure of her place in the world. She sparkled with happiness.

Outside the door to her room, heart thumping against her ribs, Jenny raised her eyes. Pam had already stepped inside.

Gently David's hands framed her face and tilted her mouth upward. Jenny's heart accelerated and her knees turned to water. His mouth covered hers in a kiss that deepened with an urgency that snatched her breath away.

She buried her fingers in his thick dark hair.

A wild pulse thundered in her ears and heat swirled through her body. When his lips released hers, she pulled slightly away and stared at him with wide eyes. Being struck by a lightning bolt would feel like this.

"Wow," he said in a hoarse voice. Warm fingers brushed a strand of honey-colored hair from her cheek. "I've missed you, Jenny, love. I let you get away once. I'm not going to be that big a fool again."

Jenny examined the intensity in his eyes and her heart soared. How often had she imagined David Foster saying those words?

THEY HAD breakfast on the hotel terrace. Sunlight sparkled off the Caribbean and spun Jenny's hair to gold. In David's eyes she didn't seem a day older than she had in college.

Thinking of the girl he'd known in college, he was glad for her, pleased by the changes time had worked. She had always been flip and a little brash, quick with an amusing comeback. It wasn't until he'd known her better that he'd grasped her vulnerability and understood she wasn't as confident as she appeared.

Now, with the passage of years, it seemed Jenny had come into her own. She'd blossomed with her success. She had the self-possession of a woman who knew she could cope with life's obstacles.

Jenny Marshall clearly was not looking for a man to take care of her. For all the talk about women wanting careers, it had been David's experi-

ence that most women were still looking for a husband to ride in on his white charger and ensconce them in a mansion on the hill.

It was a relief to find a woman who was genuinely committed to an important career, successful at it, yet who had remained warm and definitely feminine. Jenny would love a man for what he was, not for what he could give her. He wanted to make love to her. Right here, right now.

"David, if you don't stop looking at me like that, we're going to be arrested." Jenny wet her lips and felt her heart flip over in her breast.

Laughing, he squeezed her fingers. "How would you like to take the ferry to Isla Mujeres? I understand there's a wonderful French restaurant there. We can snorkel, tour the island...and catch the morning ferry back to Cancún."

"The morning ferry?"

"I've been told there's a charming inn above the French restaurant."

She met his eyes and what she saw in his steady gaze made her catch a quick breath and hold it.

"If I'm rushing things, just say so. I'll understand."

"You're rushing things." Though Jenny was the last person to indulge in a quick fling, she also knew this week was a block of time outside reality. "And, yes," she added softly, "I'd love to go to Isla Mujeres with you."

*

THEY TOOK the ferry from Puerto Juárez to Isla Mujeres. Wide sidewalks framed narrow streets; lively music drifted from the town square.

Scarlet bougainvillea climbed the balconies of the small inn facing the square.

As David stood at the registration desk, Jenny bit her lip and pretended great interest in the painting hung near the door and the potted palm nearby. It seemed enough time passed to register the entire Yucatán peninsula.

"The bellboy will put our bags in the room while we go to the beach," David said, smiling when she jumped at the sound of his voice. "Jenny, the desk clerk doesn't know who we are and couldn't care less."

"Was I that transparent?"

"Not at all," he teased her. "I imagine he's used to ladies hiding in the ferns." His thumbs brushed across her bare shoulders as his expression sobered. "I'm glad you aren't accustomed to checking into hotels, Jenny, love. I like that about you."

"I'm hopelessly old-fashioned," she admitted, a trace of annoyance in her voice.

"I know. And I couldn't be happier."

They held hands in the taxi ride to the southern tip of the island and El Garrafon beach. David smiled, thinking how comfortable and how right it felt to have Jenny's shoulder against his.

"Well, what do you think of Isla Mujeres?"

Jenny glanced out the window. "Beautiful. Less commercial than Cancún."

David nodded agreement. The surf was stronger here, the beaches unspoiled. "I'm here to look over the area for possible investment."

"For one of your clients?"

He hesitated, then said yes. In truth, he had only one client: himself. Managing his investments had become a full-time job. "I'm meeting Rob Spenser tomorrow afternoon. He's the attorney who's putting together an investment package for the Palenque. Would you be interested in part of the syndication? You can invest as little as a hundred thousand, or as much as half a million."

"Thank you for thinking of me, David," she said after staring at him a moment. "But, actually, my money is tied up right now." She made an airy wave, and for some reason David suddenly imagined her draped in mink and diamonds instead of wearing shorts and a halter top.

They inspected the red-and-white lighthouse above El Garrafon beach, then walked hand in hand along the sand, laughing when the surf bubbled up around their knees. After renting snorkeling gear, they paddled about the reef, pointing out to each other thousands of brilliantly colored fish.

Later, David and Jenny stretched out in the sun. They faced each other, looking deeply into each other's eyes. Someone nearby was strumming a guitar accompanied by the whisper of the surf rolling up the sand. Jenny saw an intensity in David's eyes that made her feel light-headed.

"You are so lovely," he said.

His fingers stroked her skin as gently as a caress. She felt each touch as a tiny explosion of heat; each sliding stroke brought her nerve endings singing upward. She tingled, fully alive and vibrant.

"Jenny..."

When he kissed her, Jenny melted into his arms. She clung to him and surrendered completely to the force of his lips, to the urgency rocketing through her body. When he released her, she was shaken to her toes.

David stared into her eyes for a long moment; then he stood up and extended his hand to her. Wordlessly they gathered their belongings, then they burst into simultaneous laughter and ran hand in hand toward the taxi that would take them back to the hotel.

HEREAFTER, Jenny would think of passion in tones of bronze, white and tawny brown as warm and deep as David's eyes.

David looked at her, his lopsided smile bathed in their room's sunset tones of orange and gold. "Remember the first time?" he asked softly. "All I could think about was how beautiful you were. It was snowing. Remember?"

"I remember." She fitted herself against the curves and angles of his body, blending into him.

David kissed her throat, whispered against the pulse thudding at the base of her neck. And then his tongue circled and teased her nipples until they rose like hard little buttons to meet his attention.

A slide of heat followed his hand along the curve of her waist and over her hips. She gasped with pleasure as his fingers trailed along the inside of her thighs. Heated breath rushed past her parted lips as his mouth brushed kisses across her stomach and kindled wild, dark fires.

When his tongue found her center, Jenny cried out with exquisite pleasure. Expertly, skillfully, David stroked, coaxed, until tension quivered on her skin like a live thing.

Reaching blindly, frantically, she pulled him up to her. His kiss was no longer gentle but hard and satisfying as he filled the emptiness she'd been unaware of until now.

They sensed each other's rhythms. Deep kisses accelerated the pace, soft fluttering caresses slowed it.

Then, as if her smile had been a signal they had both awaited, their bodies meshed in a final urgent blending that soared and rocketed toward an explosive, shattering union. She clung to his damp skin as if she were drowning. His shoulders contracted under her fingertips and his head dropped to her throat.

They held each other, neither wanting the magic to end, waiting until their breathing had quieted. Then David lifted his head and smiled into Jenny's softly shining eyes. "Happy?"

"I've never been happier," Jenny whispered truthfully.

He held her against him. "I'd begun to wonder if love and romance were anything more than a temporary illusion. I'd begun to doubt the existence of women like you."

"Like me?"

"Honest, open, warm. Generous of spirit. I was losing sight of the fact that there are women who can be trusted."

Unable to speak, Jenny just looked at him.

His eyes darkened. "This thing between us could become very serious very fast, Jenny, love."

"I know," she whispered. It already had.

"So I want you to know what happened between Marilyn and me."

"That isn't necessary, David," Jenny said.

David pushed a hand through his hair. "Money did something to Marilyn. Before I knew what had happened, we were living in a walled mansion with a dozen servants and two gardeners. We no longer had a few friends over for a backyard barbecue; we hosted lavish dinner parties."

"I suppose having lots of money would naturally change your life-style," Jenny said, groping for words.

"It wasn't just our life-style that changed; our values changed also. We didn't buy things because we needed them, we bought for show. Because a mansion is more impressive than a tract home. Because an antique is more valuable than something purchased off a showroom floor. We didn't buy a Rolls because it ran better, but because it looked better parked in a mansion's garage."

"You used to want a Porsche when you were in college," Jenny tilted her head. "This doesn't sound like you."

"In the beginning, I think it was me. But after a time, I realized that the people we saw looked at me as dollar signs. As contacts. There wasn't a soul among them I considered a friend. I didn't want Sara growing up in a world where values were all screwed up."

"Sara?"

"My daughter. She was starting to judge people by their addresses. She was beginning to think everyone commanded a platoon of servants—or should. That's when the arguments started with Marilyn."

"I'm sorry, David."

"Inside, Marilyn was the one thing I cannot abide and cannot forgive. And I couldn't live with it."

"What is that?" Jenny asked. A sudden sense of foreboding swept over her.

"Marilyn was a liar."

HE HAD GONE ON to explain Marilyn's deceptions, how she had begun by misstating the price of small items, had progressed to misrepresenting anything that didn't enhance her image of herself and her position in the world. She had invented a background for herself and for David more befitting their new social status than the truth. Eventually, David had discovered that Marilyn's lies had kept old friends from intruding on their new life. Once he accepted the unthinkable, that his wife was a liar, he understood that lies had permeated their relationship from the beginning.

He'd talked about the affair she had drifted into and the resultant painful deceptions. He'd told Jenny about moving out of the mansion and the lengthy custody battle for Sara. He'd spoken of starting over, of returning to basics, of getting reacquainted with himself and with Sara, of slowing the

pace of his life and his business obligations.

While David had talked about buying a house in a normal middle-American suburb and enrolling his daughter in public school, Jenny had been thinking about her Cinderella tales.

Her lies.

David's baritone had faded into the background as she'd remembered her own voice stating that Jenny Marshall paintings hung in the Denver Art Museum. An inner whisper reminded her that she'd told David about showings and subsequent sales at the Melton Gallery, about interviews and awards, receptions in her honor and high acclaim. She had blanked out large chunks of David's history since the divorce, not listening, lost in her own horrifying realization of what she'd done.

Pain darkened the color of her eyes to navy. Although she knew she should immediately confess what she'd done, she couldn't. Not now. The thought of watching David's expression change from loving to contemptuous shot an arrow through her heart.

SOMETHING had changed. David could almost pinpoint the moment when the radiance had faded from Jenny's expression and a look of deep sadness had entered her eyes. It had happened while he was telling her about Marilyn and the divorce and the fight to gain custody of Sara.

What had he said to upset her?

David shook off those troubling thoughts as he watched Jenny approach the finely set table he shared with Rob Spenser. Rob was a good friend as well as his attorney. They were having dinner tonight to talk about syndicating the Palenque, and David had asked Jenny to join them.

A surge of pride warmed David's eyes as he drew out Jenny's chair.

"Rob, I'd like you to meet Jenny Marshall." Lightly, he pressed her shoulder before he returned to his own chair. "I'm sure you've heard of her. Her paintings are hung in galleries all over America and are shown in the collections of modern artists in more museums than I can name."

Jenny's heart stopped. She should have anticipated this, but she hadn't.

Smiling broadly, Rob Spenser said smoothly, "I wish Ruth, my wife, was here. She'd be thrilled to meet you. Ruth is the art expert in our family."

Oh, no. Eyes wide and stricken, Jenny looked at them. Her mouth was too dry to speak. This was the worst, the very pits. In a flash she realized she'd placed David in a position where now he was lying, too. What had begun as a dream was plunging toward a nightmare.

She cast a desperate glance at David, and breathed a sigh of relief when he came to the rescue by signaling the waiter. He asked for news of Rob's children before he returned to Jenny.

"We talked a little about Sara's problems. How about Deuce and Rhonda—did they adjust well to di-

vorce?" he asked her over bowls of giant shrimp nested in cracked ice.

Jenny smiled, finally on safe ground. "Once they understood we wouldn't be moving and that their lives would continue much as before, they were all right with it. I'm sure Sara will be, too."

"I hope so," David said slowly.

"Is she still upset?" Rob asked.

David nodded. "Perhaps I should have waited longer before moving. Sara's had to adjust to a new life-style, a new school, new friends. And living with me."

Jenny paused with her fork midway to her lips. "You mean moving out of the house?"

David covered her hand and smiled. "No, I mean moving across country to Denver. I told you last night."

She stared at him for a long, frozen moment, her heart accelerating into overdrive. "Where in Denver?"

"In Columbine. Near Chatfield dam. Off Wadsworth and..."

"Ken Caryl Road," Jenny whispered.

She stared into space, watching her life flash before her eyes. David Foster didn't live more than two miles from her house. Their kids attended the same school.

Suddenly she felt as if the air had been knocked from her lungs. "Sara. You said your daughter's name is Sara."

"Yes. Jenny, are you all right?" David leaned forward and examined her with concern. The color had faded

from her face and her hands were rembling.

"No." Standing up abruptly, Jenny gathered her purse. "I don't feel well," he explained. "Too much sun, perhaps. Forgive me, David." Once the lies started, she thought in disgust, they prang easily to the lips. She turned and fled.

Sara Foster was her daughter's new best friend.

She remembered Rhonda telling her Sara was from California, that Sara's parents were divorced, that Sara needed a friend because she was confused and having difficulty adjusting.

Jenny hadn't realized she could hurt this much without bleeding.

*

SHE HAD TO DO something other than stand passively by while coaches turned out pumpkins. She walked to the edge of the water and watched the luminous surf bubble up around her ankles. She had to tell him. But how?

Eventually, she turned and walked along the water's edge. Jenny stared absently at the dark sand curving along the shore. After a while she realized she was looking at a sand castle, complete with moat and a tiny drawbridge fashioned from a flat bit of driftwood. The inner structure of the sand castle reminded her of the Disney castle—splendid, capped roofs, towers, promenades and walled areas. Sadly, she saw that it would soon succumb to the surf rushing in on the tide.

"Jenny?"

Jenny jumped at the sound of his voice.

"Are you feeling better?"

"Yes," she whispered. Another lie.

A light kiss brushed her temple and Jenny closed her eyes. She drew a deep, uneven breath. "David, there's something I have to tell you."

"I hope I know what it is," he said gruffly, tilting her face up to his. "I need to hear the words, Jenny, love. Tell me you love me, too."

"Oh, David, I do love you," she whispered. "I've always loved you. But there's something you have to know."

She passed a hand over her forehead and watched the tide nibble the sand castle's outer wall. The builder's dreams were about to be washed away.

Jenny exhaled slowly, hoping to quiet her racing pulse. This was it. The end of the story. Her breast rose in a long reluctant breath. "David—since meeting you again, I've played at being Cinderella. I've pretended to be things I'm not. I wanted you to think I was successful and glamorous. I wanted to be special in your eyes."

"I don't think I understand," David said slowly.

"I thought I wouldn't interest you if I was just myself. So I—" Jenny swallowed and dropped her head "—so I lied to you." She felt his stare like a hard, accusing force. "I'm not famous, David. I've never painted anything close to a masterpiece. I paint card covers for New Image Greeting Cards. It isn't real art, but it pays the bills."

"The showings and receptions, the interviews . . . ?" He sounded stunned.

"All lies." Jenny closed her eyes, hurting inside at the shock she heard in

his voice. His arm dropped from her waist and she winced at the chill rush where his warmth had been. "I wanted you to think I was successful as I used to tell you I would be. I just wanted...I wanted you to see Cinderella instead of plain Jenny Marshall."

She touched his arm and winced when he pulled away.

"What else did you lie about?" David's tone had turned harsh and accusing. "Last night—was last night a lie?"

"Oh, David, no. Last night was beautiful."

"Good God." Sudden realization sank his voice to a whisper. "I told Rob Spenser you were a famous artist. And you let me do it."

"I'm sorry, David. Sorrier than you'll ever know."

"For God's sake, Jenny—why? I trusted you. I believed in you."

Jenny watched as the waves carried away the last vestiges of the sand castle.

"I wanted to live in your world for a few days. That's all. I... I'm sorry, David."

"Sorry!" After a long silence, she heard him say, "So am I." Then he was gone.

She saw that nothing remained of the sand castle but a smooth depression. Something splendid and magical had vanished forever.

THE CINDERELLA stuff was just so much baloney. After thinking about it for most of the night, she could admit that now. She hadn't lied because she'd wanted to be Cinderella; she had lied because she didn't want to be Jenny.

There was a world of difference between the two.

Seeing David again had made her take a hard look at herself, and she hadn't liked what she'd seen. She'd seen someone who had failed to reach her potential, who lacked the confidence to reach for her dreams. Someone who made excuses rather than take risks. Who drifted through the years leaning on the word "someday."

The realization shocked her. She'd always considered herself a person who met life head on. She didn't flinch from reality. She knew herself.

That was the original lie. She didn't know herself at all.

Suddenly she missed Deuce and Rhonda and Toulouse and The-damnedcat. She missed her studio, and the smell of turpentine and linseed oil. She missed all the familiar things that made up her un-Cinderella life.

Her vacation had ended. The clock was striking midnight.

*

JENNY HAD BEEN home for a week; the kids had returned from California three days ago. A new soccer season would start Saturday. If it hadn't been for the dull ache around her heart, Jenny might have convinced herself that she had dreamed Cancún. And David Foster.

The screen door slammed. Deuce deposited an armload of groceries on the countertop, then slouched back through the screen door to get another load from Jenny's car.

Rhonda stacked canned goods in the corner cabinet. "Mom? Can I have a slumber party?"

"Not until you're thirty." Jenny balanced a carton of ice cream in her hand and frowned at the freezer. If she thawed the meat for tonight, the ice cream would fit. But she would need a blow torch to thaw the meat.

"Just a small party. Only my very best friends. We'll be quiet, honest."

Her daughter's words gradually penetrated as Jenny contemplated the problem with the ice cream. "Would this include your new friend?" Jenny asked casually. "Sara, I think her name is?"

"If her dad will let her come. He's awfully strict. Maybe you could call him for us?" Rhonda asked.

Standing very still, Jenny stared into the freezer. The minute she heard David's voice she suspected she'd fall apart. She imagined little pieces of Jenny all over the kitchen floor. Assuming, of course, that he'd speak to her in the first place. "You try, and if he doesn't agree, well . . . we'll see."

"Does this mean I can have the party?"

Jenny had a feeling she was going to regret this. "Yes."

"Great! Thanks, Mom!" After a quick hug, Rhonda ran upstairs to find the phone, no small chore considering the state of her room. "Friday night, okay?" she called down the stairs.

"Okay."

Friday night. In two days she might see David again. Would he bring Sara to the door, or just drop her off? What would he say? Maybe he wouldn't let Sara come. In that case, Jenny decided that she would call. It wasn't fair to punish the girls for her mistake.

"Mom?" Deuce stared at her. "Ice cream is dripping on your shoes."

EVERY TIME David relaxed and cleared his mind of business details, Jenny's face appeared behind his lids. He saw her laughing on the bus to Chichén Itzá, saw her eyes soft and shining and smiling up at him from her pillow.

Even knowing she'd deceived him from the first moment, he couldn't forget her. He wondered if there was something in him that attracted people who lied. It seemed to stretch coincidence that the two women in his life were both averse to the truth. He wouldn't have guessed Marilyn and Jenny to be the same type of woman, yet it appeared they were.

A weight of memory settled over his shoulders like a sack of stones. He knew what it was like to live with a liar, knew the pain and the frustration. He couldn't do it again.

But, dammit, he loved her.

Walking away from Jenny that night on the beach had been one of the hardest things he'd ever done. Even though he'd been shocked and angry, part of him had wanted to take her into his arms and soothe the utter wretchedness from her face. Experience had stopped him.

He'd known what she would say. She would have promised never to lie again. And the promise of a liar was worth less than an ounce of wind.

JENNY RAN her hands over her skirt nervously. Hers was not a *House Beautiful* home. Their dog, Toulouse, had teethed on the chair legs, the sofa sagged slightly to fit the contours of

Déuce's favorite TV-viewing position and the slipcover on Rhonda's chair had been made in her home economics class. Jenny was proud of Rhonda's accomplishment, but she doubted that *House Beautiful* would have cheered. The chair looked a bit like a wrinkled, yellow toad.

Never mind. Maybe he wouldn't come; maybe he'd have someone else drive Sara over.

The doorbell rang and Rhonda ran past Jenny to throw open the door. "Come in, Kelly Ann. Did you bring the purple nail polish?"

Pam followed her daughter into Jenny's family room. "Does David know you're inviting the parents in for drinks as they drop off the girls?"

"I didn't talk to him." Jenny rubbed her hands nervously.

She spilled part of her drink when the doorbell rang again. Rhonda and Kelly Ann raced for the door and pulled Marcie Taylor inside. Gene and Anne Taylor followed, and Jenny mixed drinks. In a few minutes the kitchen had filled with giggling girls and the family room buzzed with the conversation of their parents. She didn't see Pam answer the door.

Sara released a squeal of delight and rushed inside, leaving David on the porch with her overnight case.

"Come inside," Pam said, smiling and holding open the door. "We parents are having a drink to celebrate the fact that this slumber party is at Jenny's house and not ours."

"Thanks, but I'm late for an appointment."

Over Pam's shoulder David could see a large, comfortable room with an

inviting, lived-in look. A low bookcase was crammed with books, games and puzzles. The furniture had been chosen for comfort rather than compatibility. It was a room that invited one to sit down, kick off his shoes and relax. This was what David imagined when he heard the word "home." He hadn't lived in a house like this since he was a child.

"David, can't you give it another chance?" Pam took his arm and tugged him forward, introducing him to the Taylors and then the Bradfords. Like it or not, it seemed he would be staying for a few moments.

Then he saw Jenny. She was standing beside a couple who looked vaguely familiar. She was beautiful and animated, soft and yielding, the most desirable woman he'd ever seen.

A wave of resentment stiffened his body.

Jenny sensed his presence. But when she turned, meeting his stare above the head of her other guests, she almost flinched. He hated her. She saw it in his narrowed eyes, in the hard lines framing his mouth.

The smile faltered on her lips and a dull ache radiated from her chest.

Pam appeared at her side. "Offer him a drink," she urged between her teeth.

Jenny closed her eyes, listening to the sounds of party chatter, to the giggles and squeals emanating from the kitchen, where the girls had gathered.

All right, she told herself. This is your house, dammit, and you don't hide from people in your own house.

Midway across the room, David's drink in her hand, Jenny paused. Da-

vid was seated on the sofa beside her son, head to head in animated conversation. Deuce was wearing a fascinated expression that told her they were discussing computers. She watched them, having already imagined a similar scene, and an ache closed her heart. The slight tremble in her fingers made the ice tinkle in his drink glass.

The pleasure faded from David's eyes and he looked up at her, his face expressionless. "Hello, Jenny."

The coolness in his tone wounded her. "I brought you a drink."

"Thank you, but I can't stay." He stood, and she felt suddenly diminished by his height. "I have an appointment."

"Oh."

"What time shall I pick up Sara in the morning?"

"All the girls plan to sign up for soccer. I thought I'd drive them to the field, and the parents can pick them up there."

He nodded. He looked at her for a long minute and something flickered in the depths of his eyes. Regret? Longing? Resentment? The look passed before Jenny could identify it.

"Goodbye, Jenny."

As he walked to the door, she suddenly remembered she had forgotten to vacuum the sofa. David's gray-silk suit was liberally coated with white cat hair. Jenny covered her eyes and sighed. Damn. Well, it served him right. She bent to pat Thedamnedcat, who sat on the hearth licking a paw and surveying the party with regal disinterest.

Jenny heard the spin of gravel as David's car pulled from her driveway.

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SHE PARKED her station wagon at the edge of the soccer field the next morning and the girls spilled out. Long tables were arranged at the end of the field, and signs had been taped to their surfaces that identified age groups. Jenny collected her clipboard and sign-up sheets and walked across the field toward the table that would be hers.

Rhonda and Sara rushed to the front of Jenny's table. Both were flushed and angry, expressions of deepest betrayal darkening their faces.

"What's wrong?" Jenny looked at them, puzzled.

"Mr. Lauper says relatives can't be on the same team!"

"What?"

"He says it's a new rule!"

Jenny read the booklet, then stared at Rhonda. Rhonda was her best player. Without Rhonda, she didn't see how she'd have a chance of a winning season. "Why would Ed do such a dumb thing?"

Celia, Jenny's coaching assistant, shrugged. "You know how it is. Coaches play their own kids, and the other parents scream favoritism. Ed got tired of parents calling him in the middle of the night to complain. So he changed the ruling."

"It isn't fair!" Rhonda said hotly. "I can't play on my own mom's team!"

Jenny read the ruling again and sighed. She should have gone to the coaches' meeting. But she'd been in Cancún. "Well," she said slowly, "I guess you'll have to sign up on the other team."

"You don't understand, Mom. Sara and I want to be on the same team," Rhonda said.

"You can both be on the other coach's team."

"No, we can't, Mrs. Marshall," Sara said. "I can't play on that team because my dad's coaching it."

Jenny blinked. In a flash she grasped what was about to happen. Rhonda would end up on David's team, and Sara would be on hers.

"Well," Jenny said a few moments later, raising a smile for Sara as Rhonda ran toward David's table, "looks like you get me." The thought of coaching David's daughter raised conflicting emotions. She filled in Sara and David's names on the form, then paused at the next line. "What's your dad's occupation?" When Sara didn't answer, Jenny looked up, surprised at the high color in Sara's cheeks. "He's an investment broker, isn't he?"

Sara shook her head. "I don't think so." An agony of embarrassment darkened her eyes. "He used to own a computer company but he sold it." She looked at Jenny anxiously. "If my dad is unemployed does that mean I can't play soccer?"

"Of course not. You can still—"

The next words tumbled out in a rush. "After Dad sold the company, things went bad for us, Mrs. Marshall. Mom left and we moved out of our house. I'm going to public school, and Dad sold the Rolls-Royce and bought an old Chrysler. We have to watch our money very carefully now."

"Sara, honey, there's a misunderstanding here. I think you should talk to your dad about this."

"Oh, no, Mrs. Marshall." The girl's eyes widened and she cast a quick glance toward David's table. "My dad never talks about money or work. Not anymore."

Embarrassment flamed the girl's cheeks, and she moved from foot to foot. Jenny stared toward David, seeing the sun flash from his Rolex watch. Her immediate urge was to take Sara by the hand and lead her to David, and ask him to straighten this out right now.

"Mrs. Marshall? Can I go now?"

"What? Oh, yes, Sara. I'll collect the fee from your dad."

"No, I have it right here." Sara dug in her pocket and produced a wad of bills. "I saved it from my allowance."

Because she thought the fifteen dollars would strain her father's financial resources, Jenny thought, looking at the small pile of crumpled bills.

She filled in the rest of the registration forms automatically, her mind not fully on the task.

WHEN THE HOUSE had quieted that night, Jenny sat on her bed and slanted the reading light over the papers she'd photocopied at the library. Then she drew a long breath and started reading.

At the finish, she lay back on the bed and stared at the ceiling, her eyes glazed with shock. David Foster was definitely not poor. He was filthy rich. He'd made one fortune on Foster/Beta computers and another fortune or two when IBM bought out the company. After the IBM purchase, David had faded from the news except for two small items. One reported his divorce,

and the other mentioned David as the owner of an oil company that had made a mammoth oil strike drilling in the North Sea.

He had lied to her.

Anger filled Jenny's eyes as she remembered him telling her he was an investment broker, and telling her that the media had inflated the price of the IBM buyout. He'd told her he didn't have any more money than anyone else she knew.

"Wait a minute," she said slowly. Something was very wrong here.

She remembered David buying Sara the shell necklace instead of the expensive gold earrings. He'd had a room like Jenny's at the Palenque instead of one of the suites. His home was across Wadsworth Boulevard instead of in Cherry Hills or the Polo Grounds. His own daughter thought he was unemployed and practically destitute.

Jenny's brow knit in a baffled frown. She remembered David's baritone voice as he told her about his life with Marilyn after the money came. Remembered passing the villages on the road to Chichén Itzá, and how David spoke wistfully of a simpler life and a return to values that meant something.

"Good Lord," she breathed softly. "We're all liars, one way or another."

When she'd told David she was a famous artist, she had known it was a lie. But she sensed in her heart that David didn't grasp that he was lying by minimizing his fortune. He was guilty of the silent lie. And by trying to live as if money wasn't important, he was deceiving himself. And Sara.

"HI, HONEY," David said, looking up when Sara came in the door carrying her schoolbooks. "How was school?"

"Fine. I got an A on my science paper."

"Great." He followed her into the kitchen, smiling as she made a sandwich and poured a glass of milk. This was his favorite time of day. He made a point of being home when Sara returned from school so they could talk. He was sharing his daughter's life as he hadn't when they had lived in California.

In California, Sara had attended a posh girls' school. She hadn't worn jeans, as she was wearing now; she'd worn outfits assembled from boutiques along Rodeo Drive. The school's limo had picked her up in the morning and delivered her home in the late afternoon. She'd received grades for such things as deportment and social graces. In David's mind, these were about as valuable as plastic apples.

"How about you and me going out for dinner tonight?" he asked, leaning his elbows on the kitchen counter. "We'll go somewhere fabulous, and you can wear one of those terrific outfits I never see anymore."

Sara put her sandwich aside and examined green fingernails that made David smile. "We don't have to go anywhere fabulous, Dad. A hamburger or a pizza would be okay." She gave him a quick look. "We have to watch our money."

David smiled with pleasure. Thank God. Slowly, Sara was beginning to understand money. Nothing could have pleased him more. He felt a surge of pride that she understood it wasn't

where one dined but with whom that was important.

"I think we can afford a night out," he said, grinning. "But if you'd prefer a pizza, that's fine with me."

Her relief was so obvious that he was momentarily puzzled.

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THE WEEKS flew by. The promise of spring blossomed into early summer; petunias replaced the tulips, crocus and daisies peeking out of Jenny's garden. In a week, school would end for the summer. Soon after, Deuce would depart for computer camp and Rhonda to Girl Scout camp. After they returned, they'd spend a week at home, then fly off to California for a month with Walter.

For the first time since her divorce, the prospect of an empty house didn't dismay Jenny.

"So, what's different?" Pam studied her across the sunlight streaming through the kitchen window. "Does this have anything to do with a certain gorgeous man I occasionally run into at the grocery store?"

Some of the radiance faded from Jenny's expression. She saw David twice a week at the practice field, ran into him at the grocery store, at the cleaner's, at Pizza Hut. She drove Rhonda to David's house; he drove Sara to hers. But if they inhabited the same house, they wouldn't need to make such a point of ignoring each other.

"No," Jenny leaned over the table. She smiled again, and an uncharacteristic shyness entered her eyes. "Well," she said slowly, almost reluctantly,

"I've been working on something." She drew a breath. "Pam... I have a *real* painting."

A flattering curiosity sprang into Pam's eyes. "You mean art as in famous-artist-type art? When do I get to see it?"

Silently, Jenny led the way to her studio. Was she ready to show *Sand Castle*? Her fingers trembled as she lifted the dustcover from the painting.

She heard Pam gasp.

"Oh, my God," Pam whispered, transferring her gaze to Jenny.

And then they were hugging each other and Pam kept looking at the painting and saying, "Oh, my God," over and over as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing. It was one of the finest moments in Jenny's life.

AS NEITHER Jenny's team nor David's had had a winning season, neither made the playoffs. The scrimmage between the two teams was the second-to-last game before the girls scattered for the summer. In ordinary circumstances, the final score of the scrimmage wouldn't have mattered, as scrimmage scores didn't count toward the win/loss record. Normally, Jenny would have been relaxed and wouldn't have cared about the final outcome. She would have told the girls to have a good time and play for fun.

But David was coaching the other team and that made all the difference. She wanted her team to beat his into the dust.

The girls looked across the field, identifying friends on the opposing team. In a regular game, the oppo-

nents were strangers from a rival school.

At first, both teams were exchanging shouts and laughter with friends on the opposing team. But it soon became apparent to players and spectators that this was no casual game. Both coaches stalked the sidelines, shouting angrily at their players, waving furiously, urging the players to settle down and play winning ball.

The laughter died from the field. The girls faced one another as fiercely as they had faced players from rival schools.

The game was tied as the fourth quarter began. Mary passed the ball across the field. Immediately both Rhonda and Sara dashed forward, running at full speed and concentrating on the ball. They collided at full force, and sprawled in the grass, gasping for breath.

"Foul!" David shouted, marching onto the field. "Red fouled Blue!"

"Your player tripped mine!" Jenny threw down her clipboard and plunged toward center field. She didn't halt until she and David were nose to nose.

The cords rose on his neck. "Oh, yeah?"

"You're so blind you can't see what's right under your nose!"

His eyes darkened to black. "Do you think I'd take your word for anything?"

The tension between them exploded. Jenny swung at him, her one thought to slap the face just inches from her own. But David caught her wrist as her hand came up. His quick movement pulled her hard against his body. A wild shock of heat erupted

through her senses. She stared into his eyes and saw the sudden blaze of passion. His stare penetrated her own; his hair was damp at the temples, as it would have been after lovemaking. His shoulders tensed.

The most intensely physical moment of Jenny's life was happening in front of a hundred people.

A similar thought must have occurred to David, because he suddenly blinked and looked toward the sidelines.

The referee stormed forward, jerking his thumb in the air. "Okay, you two, you're out." His scowl was filled with disgust.

"Out?" Jenny repeated in disbelief.

"What do you mean out?" David demanded.

"A double coaches' foul. You two are out of the game. O-U-T, out. Turn it over to your assistant coaches and go home. Both of you."

Jenny cast an apologetic look at Rhonda and Sara, who were staring anxiously back and forth between her and David. They were holding hands, their own differences settled.

Feeling like slime, like the world's worst example of a coach or a mother, Jenny turned without a word and walked swiftly toward her car. She didn't look back and she didn't look at David, who was walking beside her.

"Jenny?"

She drew a long breath, then glanced over her shoulder and looked at him from expressionless eyes.

"We have to talk. That was appalling."

She nodded. David looked as weary and upset as she was. "My house. Five minutes."

DAVID SAT at the kitchen table. The kitchen had the same comfortable lived-in look he'd noticed in her family room. The thought crossed his mind that Marilyn would have gone crazy here, trying to remove the schoolbooks from the countertops and the drawings and notes from the bulletin board.

Jenny caught her lower lip between her teeth. "I don't know what came over me. I tried to slap you. I've never done anything like that before." When he didn't respond, she looked at him, her eyes cool and challenging. "You don't believe me, do you?"

The words were out of his mouth before he could halt them. "How do I know we aren't playing Cinderella, part two: Our heroine puts on the gloves and goes three rounds."

"You just can't leave it alone, can you?"

"Would you in my place?"

"Oh, David," she whispered, her anger draining away in a rush. "What are we doing?" A plea entered her eyes. "The last thing I ever wanted was to hurt you. I know you don't believe that, but it's true." Tears stung her eyelids. "I love you."

"Don't, Jenny. Don't say it." Pushing from the table, he brushed Toulouse aside and stood up.

"I've always loved you." Slowly Jenny pulled herself to her feet, facing him. "Why do you think I left Frascotti's?" He stared at her. "I left when I received your wedding invitation. It

hurt so much that I couldn't paint, couldn't think."

He covered his eyes with his hand. "When you left for Rome, I thought it was over."

"When you let me go, I thought you didn't care anymore."

Suddenly she was in his arms, her head on his shoulder, his strength wrapped around her.

"God, Jenny. I've missed you so much."

"Every night. Every long, endless night." She touched his cheek. "I love you, David."

A smile moved against her palm, and his eyes twinkled. "Would you really have slugged me?"

She closed her eyes and laughed softly. "I can't believe I did such a thing. Can you ever forgive me?"

Jenny saw the struggle in his eyes, watched his happiness fade to a troubled expression. He was thinking of Cancún.

"I've tried." He looked into space. "What I can't understand is why you had to lie."

It was all unraveling. She couldn't put the explanation into words he could understand. Emotions aroused by hope swung in a stormy arc and her voice emerged icy.

"You're no stranger to deception, David. A man as rich as Fort Knox who drives a three-year-old car and goes coy when money is mentioned. Is that honest?"

The color drained from his face, then flooded back. "It's protection. You can't guess how many people latch on to someone with money."

"And that justifies hiding the truth? From me, from the world at large, even from your own daughter?"

"Leave Sara out of this."

"No, David. You wanted the truth and you're going to hear it. Sara is worried sick about money. She thinks you're unemployed, did you know that?"

He stared at her. "That's utter nonsense!"

"She paid her soccer fee out of her allowance because she thinks you can't afford it. She needs new shoes in the worst way, but she hasn't asked you for the money because she thinks you don't have it. You've done such a good job of deceiving yourself, and everyone around you, that even Sara thinks you're broke!"

"That isn't true. It can't be." It had been a mistake to come here. How many times had he watched Marilyn do exactly what Jenny was doing? How many times had Marilyn shifted the emphasis from her transgressions by attacking him? He made a sound of disgust. Would he ever learn?

Blindly he strode out of the room, stepping over Toulouse, who was sleeping across a doorjamb, half in and half out of a large sunlit room.

He might have missed it. He might have rushed past the door Toulouse had nudged open, and he might never have glanced inside.

But he lifted his head at the right instant, and he stopped midstride in the doorway to Jenny's studio. He stared at the painting resting on an easel.

Waves tipped by moonlight and faintly luminous tumbled forward from the left side of the painting. He

could almost smell the sea. The sand castle whispered of enchantment, of filmy dreams. Overlaying all was a deep and tragic sense of loss. The moonlit sand castle would be swept away. Mourned by no one, for it wasn't real. It had never been intended to endure, but only to give pleasure to the builder.

And then he understood.

A small sound rasped in his throat as he covered his eyes.

Jenny had built a sand castle out of words, a splendid structure of dreams and ambitions from long ago. She hadn't done it for him, but for herself. And her castle had never been intended to endure; he saw that now.

"Good God," he whispered, staring at the painting. It was unquestionably masterly. Jenny hadn't lied in Cancún; she had predicted her future. This painting would place her on the road to greatness.

And David Foster? His jaw tightened. He, too, had built a castle from material no more substantial than sand. With a rush of insight he gazed at the painting and understood that everything Jenny had said about him was true.

He walked outside to his three-year-old Chrysler. In his mind he heard the oncoming rush of the tide.

WHEN SARA returned from the soccer game, the living room floor was covered with shoes. Track shoes, running shoes, saddle shoes, loafers, high-heeled pumps, sandals, boots, thongs.

"I didn't know your size and what you wanted, so..." David grinned and shrugged. "Who won the game?"

"It ended in a tie," she said, still staring at the shoes. She lifted large, dark eyes. "Dad?"

"Sit down, honey," he said gently, patting the sofa beside him. "There are some things I want to tell you."

*

IF THERE HAD been someone special to share the evening with, tonight would have been the most perfect moment in Jenny Marshall's life. She sipped her champagne and looked at the gowns and tuxedos thronging the Melton Gallery.

Pam smiled fondly at her side. "Congratulations, Jen. Everyone's talking about *Sand Castle*." She tilted her head and looked at Jenny with an odd expression. "All that stuff you said in Cancún—it's going to be like that, isn't it?"

"Maybe." Jenny took Pam's hand and pressed it.

A news photographer kneeled in front of them. They both blinked as the flash exploded, then Pam drifted toward a group of people.

Jenny hadn't heard from David since the day of the great soccer match, five weeks ago, and she hadn't seen him. He appeared to have dropped from the edge of the earth.

She smoothed her hands over her black silk gown—courtesy of VISA—and smiled at a woman who grabbed her hand and pumped it.

"Splendid, my dear, simply splendid! I made a bid, but your work has already sold."

"Thank you," Jenny murmured, starting to get the hang of this. All that

was expected of her was a gracious thank-you and a pleasant smile.

And then, all too soon, the showing was over.

Jenny experienced an inexplicable rush of depression. And she felt very alone. The kids were in California visiting Walter. Her friends had apparently assumed she'd made other plans and had departed, leaving Jenny behind. There was no one waiting to share the biggest moment in her life or to help her celebrate.

She lifted the hem of her black silk gown and stepped into the night.

He was leaning against a car parked at the curb, his arms crossed over the lapels of a black tuxedo. Some men were born to wear a tuxedo, and David Foster was such a one. He bowed low, then opened the door of the car, holding it for her. "Your carriage awaits, my princess."

"David! What...?" It was a Porsche, low-slung and luxurious. She turned wide eyes to him. "You bought a Porsche? David, that's wonderful! You always wanted a—"

"Not a word," he said, smiling into her eyes. "Soon."

She didn't understand, but she knew something had changed, something important that he would explain in his own time.

She was too dazed to notice where they were going until the Porsche turned off Wadsworth. "Your house?" she asked, smiling.

"The palace," he said, returning her smile as he guided the car to a halt in the driveway.

It was his house, but it wasn't exactly as she remembered from the times

she'd dropped Rhonda off or picked her up. An addition had been added upstairs, altering the roofline; a row of new skylights reflected the moonlight. Behind the fence, where the top of a bush had once been, rose the roof of what looked to be a poolhouse. "You remodeled?" The house looked warmer, more inviting.

"I've been busy," he admitted, eyes dancing.

David escorted her to the door. Then he turned and gently pulled her against his body and into his arms.

"I'm very proud of you," he said huskily, gazing at her lips. "Can you ever forgive me for being such a fool?"

"Forgive you?" She stared into his eyes as her breasts and hips melted against him. "I don't know what you're talking about... but yes. Yes, David. I love you."

"I can't imagine why, after the way I've behaved."

He kissed her then, a long, lingering kiss that spoke of love and the passion that would come later. Then he touched her cheek and pushed open the door.

"Surprise!"

Jenny blinked. Confetti rained down around her, and a hundred champagne glasses toasted her success.

"I love you, Jenny," David said, his hands on her shoulders.

And then she saw the old man and the horse she had painted for him in college. The large canvas dominated the room, mounted beneath soft spotlights. She leaned heavily on David's arm, steadying legs that were suddenly trembling.

"I wanted *Sand Castle*, Jenny," he murmured against her hair. "But Melton sold it to his aunt, a collector. The painting was sold before the showing opened."

She looked at the study of the old man and the horse, tears sparkling in her eyes. "You kept it. All these years."

Then Pam emerged from the crowd, and embraced Jenny, holding her tightly. "I'm jealous," she said. "When do I get a Jenny Marshall painting?"

"Soon," Jenny promised, looking at David, tears of happiness hanging on her lashes like diamonds; then Rhonda and Deuce and Sara ran forward to hug her. "I thought you were all in California!" she said, laughing and wiping her eyes. David stood against the wall, smiling and watching her.

"Mr. Foster flew us home for your party." Rhonda's eyes were bright with excitement.

"Dad says there's no point in having money if you can't enjoy it," Sara added happily.

Then she was surrounded, as well-wishers converged on her. She saw David during the next two hours, but always at a distance. When she understood, she gave him a dazzling smile, which he returned from near the doors. The evening was hers, a triumph not yet to be shared. His smile told her to seize her moment.

She was waiting when his hand lightly touched her elbow. "Do you think I could steal you away?"

Jenny smiled up into his dark eyes. He led her up a sweeping curve of stairs, then into a room washed by

starlight falling softly through the bank of skylights. The room would be a perfect studio.

He led her to the love seat and bowed as he had when he'd opened the car door. Jenny smiled at him, then seated herself, wanting to stroke his beloved face.

David reached into his pocket; then he cleared his throat and knelt on one knee at her feet. "M'lady," he said, gazing at her mouth and then into her moist eyes, "I have searched the realm for the princess to whom this belongs."

Her fingers flew to her mouth. Resting in the center of David's palm was a miniature crystal slipper. It sparkled magically as if cut from dreams.

"Oh, David," Jenny whispered through a rush of tears. "You understand! You really understand."

"There's a final test," he said, smiling up at her. Then he tilted the slipper and an exquisite diamond ring

dropped into his palm. It caught the starlight and flashed brilliant fire. Reaching for her hand, he slipped the ring onto her trembling finger. "As I suspected," he said softly, "a perfect fit."

"David..."

"Will you have me, Jenny? And let me spend the rest of my life making up to you whatever hurt I've caused?"

"Oh, David," she said, staring at him with shining eyes.

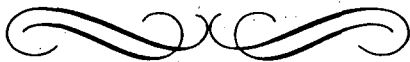
"Say yes, Jenny, love. Say yes."

She slid to the floor beside him and threw her arms around his neck, covering his face with kisses.

"Yes, yes, yes!"

Before Jenny sighed blissfully and surrendered to her prince, she gazed at the crystal slipper twinkling in the starlight. It didn't surprise her to glimpse a shadowy figure standing beside the slipper. She knew how it was.

"Thank you, Fairy Godmother," Jenny whispered.



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STAR SIGNS—MARCH & APRIL



CAPRICORN December 23–January 22

A wave of change is running through your sign and you may have to rethink some of your plans. Success is likely to come from your ability to be adaptable. You're feeling very loving, and this month won't go unnoticed by that special person.



AQUARIUS January 23–February 22

You're still riding high from the events of last month, and the positive momentum should last a while longer. Any setbacks will be temporary and just provide you with a moment to take stock.



PISCES February 23–March 22

Try to stop putting others' interests before your own. Now is the time to realize some of your ambitions; any resentment felt by others will change when they see how committed you really are. Help comes from a surprising source.



ARIES March 23–April 22

Patience will be needed as passions are running high and those close may be acting strangely. Stay calm and there will be compensations later as your life looks to be very interesting. A lucky break late in the month will improve your mood.



TAURUS April 23–May 22

Changes abound in almost all aspects of your life. A recent romantic encounter could lead to something stronger and you may need to make a commitment. Work and career moves are also in the cards and now is the time to put yourself first.



GEMINI May 23–June 21

A quieter month than of late gives you time to relax and enjoy the benefits of any changes you have recently undergone. A social gathering could prove the highlight of the month, with friends showing you how much they appreciate you.

STAR SIGNS (continued)



CANCER June 22-July 22

Your lucky streak looks set to continue both in romance and finance. Toward the end of the month you could feel confident enough to make some changes in your life. Take care, however, where legal matters are concerned, as the small print needs careful reading.



LEO July 23-August 22

Friends and family make sure you're in demand socially. This should be a happy and interesting month in which you make some progress toward a long-held ambition. Money matters may need careful attention this month.



VIRGO August 23-September 22

Relationships may have been strained lately; however, you have all the tact and charm needed to smooth out any misunderstandings. An excellent month for travel—maybe a romantic weekend with someone close.



LIBRA September 23-October 22

This month could be the turning point for you both in career and romance. You have been in the doldrums lately but you should begin to see more clearly the direction in which you want to travel. Loved ones could provide the extra confidence to be able to reach out and take what is rightfully owed you.



SCORPIO October 23-November 22

Scorpio is a very strong-natured sign with a grim determination envied by many. This should be a very positive month, with friends making that extra effort to help you achieve whatever you desire.



SAGITTARIUS November 23-December 22

Your spirit of adventure returns, bringing with it that extra sparkle and zest for life you have been missing. Social happenings and a general spirit of happiness make this an exciting go-getting month, which ends with the highlight of a new romance.

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Marie Ferrarella

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In the midst of planning the society wedding of the year, Alexandra Michaels found the man of her dreams. Sean Lawton simply devastated her senses. He was perfect in every way, even ready to exchange his jet-set life for the simple joys of home. There was only one problem: Sean was the groom, and she'd been hired to cater his wedding.

DESIGNING WOMAN • Candace Schuler

When fashion designer Daphne Granger and her ex-husband, Dr. Adam Forest, meet again after eleven years, it's once again "love at first sight." But can they sustain and rebuild a life together on this instant, undeniable attraction?

**Look for these stories
and many more in
future issues!**

READER'S CORNER

CROSSWORD #23

ACROSS

1. Strange
4. Brief swim
7. Pea container
10. Jump
12. Covered the inside of
14. Sulk
15. Actor Andrews
16. "The _____ Sanctum"
17. Ripens
18. Student's assignment
20. Big Ben's city
22. Shaded
24. Writing tablet
25. Hero
27. Agent, for short
29. Yes votes
32. Worships
34. Use a chair
36. Pleasant
38. Actor Beatty
39. Teeter-totters
42. Raced
43. Old horses
45. First lady
46. Aquatic mammals
48. Guide
50. Skill
52. Comfort
53. Yard
55. Scrabble pieces
57. Pancake mixture
60. Baggage carrier
63. _____ Stanley Gardner
64. Harvests
66. Pennsylvania canal
68. Join metal together

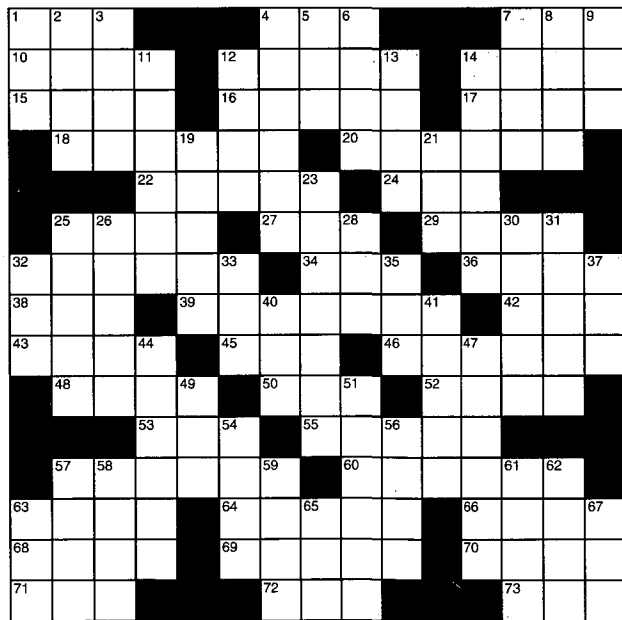
69. Spouses
70. 1492, e.g.
71. Asner and Sullivan
72. Scarlet
73. Mineo

DOWN

1. Used
2. Bargain
3. One from Copenhagen
4. Supper
5. Tavern
6. Fruit skin
7. Walt Kelly's comic strip
8. Ready, as for business
9. _____ Moines
11. Church head
12. Leo
13. Let fall
14. Enrage
19. Feet parts
21. No vote
23. Cake, e.g.
25. Perfect
26. Avoid
28. Actress-singer _____ Zadora
30. Buenos _____
31. Frighten
32. Columnist _____ Landers
33. Witness
35. Couple
37. Printers' measures
40. Gabor sister
41. Direct the course of
44. Added seasoning

47. Sampled
49. Speck
51. Left a gratuity
54. Semester
56. Defeat
57. Raised
58. "_____ Well That Ends Well"
59. Behind
61. Cycles
62. Singer _____ Coolidge
63. Female sheep
65. Consumed
67. Snakelike fish

Solution on page 74 of this issue.



HARLEQUIN® WORLD'S BEST *Romances*

STEPHANIE JAMES—Cautious Lover

Jess Winters always operated with a master plan, and Elly Trent found herself right on schedule to marry him. Just once Elly wanted to shake Jess's iron control. Challenging a lion in his den is never without consequences—but Elly hadn't realized they could be so delightful.

ANNE STUART—Catspaw

"It takes a thief to catch a thief," everyone said. But the fabulous Von Emmerling emeralds were Ferris's responsibility during San Francisco's high-society Puffin Ball. So when she got foisted with Patrick Blackheart, famous ex-cat burglar, and his security agency, she couldn't help but wonder what the second thief would do once he caught the first one. Could she trust Blackheart not to run off with the emeralds himself? Could she trust him at all?

MARIE FERRARELLA—Through Laughter and Tears

Sam Madison had always used humor to hide her feelings from the world, but when she met manager Jake Benedict, her armor failed her. He saw right through to her vulnerability. And more than anything she had to keep him from finding out she wanted to be more than his client.

MARGARET ST. GEORGE—Castles and Fairy Tales

Cinderella didn't discuss dirty dishes at the ball, and Jenny Marshall couldn't admit she was just a Denver mother of two who painted greeting cards for a living—not when David Foster, her college sweetheart, materialized like magic, in the middle of her vacation. No, Jenny would live out her dreams...at least until the clock struck twelve.